you know where to find me (and I know where to find you)

by spacebeyonce

Summary

Kairi and Riku search the ends of the worlds for Sora; it takes them a while, but they find him eventually.
hey I'm back on ao3 and it's only to post this one thing. just this one thing.
let the record show that I have no idea what I'm doing. definitely a heavy WIP, I've got
like....half of it planned out. I'm still working at the middle. but anyway!

so! kingdom hearts 3 happened. and uh....the nicest thing I can say is that I was very
disappointed. at least the game was pretty. but we got what we got and this is me
trying to deal with it. sorta.

title is inspired by the song warrior by the amazing and talented chloe x halle

I'll blabber some more in the end notes, but for now: take my hand. follow me here. I
hope to god someone out there likes this. this is unbeta'd and I edited this on my own
as best as I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kairi knew she was dreaming, because she was back in that empty, pressed in by a darkness so
thick not even her light could pierce it.

She felt shattered, broken into thousands of pieces, and her back throbbed with every faint breath
she took. She couldn’t see, couldn’t move, and felt the overwhelming pressure of tears behind her
eyes at the thought of staying in this cold darkness, broken, forever.

Kairi didn’t know how long she was there, trapped in that oppressive dark; it could’ve been
seconds, hours, days. She wanted to cry, wanted to scream and scream until her voice finally
reached someone, but she felt the darkness press in on her at all sides, a vacuum, and knew no
matter how much she hoped, no one would ever be able to reach her.

“Kairi!”

Suddenly, there was warmth. Suddenly, there was light, as warm, firm arms scooped her up from
behind, broad hands folding over her middle and holding her tight. She could smell it, then – the
warmth, dirt and sweat and blood. Kari looked down, somehow, and could see him, his warm
brown hands, gritty with dirt and dried blood, laced over her belly.

Sora.

“Kairi!” She could practically hear the smile in his voice, the relief. “I finally found you!”

Yeah, she wanted to say, you found me, and she must have been crying by now, she had to be, but
before she could even try and test her voice, the darkness that was crushing her shattered.

Light, bright, overwhelming, overcame her sight, blinding, and as Kairi opened her mouth to cry
out at the sudden change, salt water filled her mouth.

Even blinded, she could recognize that taste, and Kairi opened her eyes to the blue, blue waters of
Destiny Islands as Sora pulled his arms away from her middle, grabbing her hand to lead her to
They broke the surface of the water gasping, warm air brushing their faces, and Kairi blinked against the bright sunlight, trying to focus as Sora tugged her along to the shoreline.

There, jumping up from where he was sitting in the sand, was Riku, waiting there as if he knew they’d show up there all along.

As they stumbled forward, rushing to get to him, Riku waded into the waters and met them halfway, arms outstretched.

Kairi slowly blinked awake and stared out at the stars through her open window, paying no mind to the tears that slipped over the bridge of her nose.

At her back, Naminè sighed in her sleep, her shoulder blades pressing into her back as she slept. The contact made her back throb, pressing against the jagged, tender scar that stretched down her spine, but she ignored it, pushing back the covers.

Slowly, Kairi sat up, careful not to wake her, and blindly reached out towards her nightstand for her phone, grabbing her gummiphone at first before realizing her mistake and reaching for her regular phone instead. Squinting at the sudden brightness, Kairi rubbed at an eye while she checked the time, swiping at dry tear tracks.

Two in the morning.

And, after further investigation, Sora’s birthday.

Kairi closed her eyes, feeling like she swallowed a rock, and two more tears slipped down her cheeks. Of course, of course it was; it had been the beginning of the new year when Xheanort had been defeated.

Three months, then, since that sham of a Keyblade War. Three months since Sora disappeared.

Kairi couldn’t stay in bed anymore, wouldn’t have been able to fall back to sleep after that dream regardless, and quietly slipped out of bed. She pulled on a pair of shoes and blindly grabbed a jacket before slipping out the window, silently landing on the ground, walking away from her home and feeling slightly guilty that she didn’t leave a note. She didn’t want to make Naminè worry, but she couldn’t stay there.

For a while she walked, aimlessly, not really having a true destination before giving up and stealing one of the rowboats, heading to the play island.

She made a beeline for the tree -their tree – and sat on the curve of the thick trunk of the paopu tree, looking out at the moonlit waves of the sea.
That dream wasn’t entirely a memory, not really – she could remember the dark, the pain and the empty, and Sora appearing like a beacon.

But they didn’t return through the oceans of their home, throwing themselves into Riku’s arms and tumbling back into the sea.

They were in the darkness one second and home the next, sitting on their paopu tree and looking out over the setting sun of Destiny Islands. She could hear everyone in the distance, playing, laughing. Safe.

Her hand was wrapped up in Sora’s, and he squeezed it and smiled.

And then, between one blink and the next, he vanished, slipping through her fingers like smoke, and it was just her. Like he was never there.

Kairi felt sick at the memory, and wrapped her arms around herself, still looking out at the sea.

A scent wafted up from the jacket she wore, the potpourri that Sora’s mother preferred still clinging to the jacket, and Kairi’s stomach cramped up with grief.

The jacket was a little large for her, so she knew it was one that she’d stolen from one of her boys, before. Now, after the dream and the discovery of the date, this added reminder of her loss knocked the breath out of her.

“Kairi.”

She looked up at the gentle call, and saw Riku heading towards her, dressed similarly to her in his pajamas, a jacket halfway zipped up his chest. He looked tired, dark shadows bruised under his eyes, but his stare was sharp and alert as he moved towards her.

Of course, it was Riku – Riku always reached her first.

On that day, when Sora faded away under her hands, voices began to rise on the beach, alarm echoing across the shore, but it was Riku that got to her first as she curled into herself, slipping off the tree and tumbling into his arms.

“What are you doing up?” She waved at the space in front of her, gesturing him to come closer, and he quickly moved into the space she made for him, leaning up against the trunk of the paopu tree between her knees.

Once he had settled, Kairi loosely hooked her ankles around his waist, reaching out to thread her fingers through his hair, gently combing through the strands.

“I couldn’t really sleep.” Riku murmured, muscles already beginning to relax under her hands. “I decided to take a walk around the islands, tire myself out a bit. And then I saw you.”

“Ah.” Kairi stayed quiet for a minute, focusing on the feel of Riku’s hair sliding between her fingers. It was a little longer, now; Riku decided a couple months ago to grow his hair out of the botched haircut he received from fighting heartless in the Realm of Darkness.

(Sora had given him shit for days when Riku finally fessed up about how he got his surprise
haircut, ribbing him for it any chance he got.)

It was so soft, as always, slipping through her fingers like silk, and Kairi absently began to twine a small braid together.

“…. I had a dream.” She finally admitted, putting more attention than necessary in the braid she was making. “A dream about when I – when Sora found me, you know.”

Riku said nothing, but she knew he was listening, one hand sliding up to loosely wrap around her ankle, grounding.

“It was the same, but it – it ended different. We ended up in the water instead of – you know. We ran to you.”

Kairi finished off the braid and wished that she’d had one of her hair ties, knowing at this length the braid would slide apart before the night was over.

“I woke up and checked the time,” she continued, her voice barely a whisper, “and I saw that today is Sora’s birthday.”

Riku stiffened at that and let go of her ankle to turn and stare up at her, his hands sliding up to cup the backs of her knees. Kairi adjusted to the change of position, placing her hands on his shoulders, just looking at him. His eyes were so sad. “Kairi –”

“Mnm. It’s okay.” Kairi gave him a smile, even though her voice was thick with tears, and her hands moved up to cup the sides of his neck. “We should do something for him. Today should be a happy day.”

“….Yeah. Okay.” Riku’s voice cracked a little, and Kairi leaned down to bump her forehead against his, paying no mind to the tears dripping off her chin. “What do you want to do? We should probably get a cake, of course. One of Sora’s favorites.”

“Definitely one of his favorites,” Kairi agreed. “That chocolate cake, yeah?”

“With the strawberry icing.” Riku huffed out a laugh, gently rubbing a thumb against Kairi’s skin in comfort. “I never knew how he could eat that. It’s way too much sugar for even me. We’ll get a small one.”

“Yeah. And then we’ll go visit his parents. We haven’t seen Jun and Aouli since – since we told them.”

Kairi grimaced at that, and Riku winced right along with her.

Telling Sora’s parents the altered story about his disappearance had been one of the worst days of their lives, right up there with Sora vanishing without a trace. Aouli had blinked at them, like he couldn’t understand what he just heard, while Jun let out a breath like she’d been punched and sank down onto their couch.

“But…we can find him, right?” Aouli asked blankly. “He always…. he came back before. We just
got him home. So he’ll be home again. Right?”

Riku was speechless, and Kairi had started crying at this point, wringing her hands and shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I –”

“But he –” Jun’s voice broke, and Riku started blinking rapidly, eyes quickly filling up as his hands curled into fists at his sides. “He has to come home, because we – because I didn’t get to tell him –”

Sora’s mother curled her hands into fists, gripping the fabric of her shirt over her middle, and that seemed to do it, her face collapsing in sadness as she curled over her lap, hands still gripping her belly.

It felt like Riku could see the memory play in her eyes, and he gave her a squeeze, bringing her back to the present. “Yeah, we can visit them. We’ll split the cake and see how they’re doing.”

“We’ve gotta stay updated to let Sora know everything he missed, once we find him.”

Riku paused at that, blinking, and when he reached up to wipe the tears from Kairi’s cheeks, his smile was sad. “Yeah, you’re right. We’ve got to stay on top of things.”

His voice was so unhappy, and she couldn’t take it, couldn’t bear the thought of him starting to doubt now. She squeezed him, gently, but her tone was firm, “Riku. We’re going to find him, of course we are. We’ve been working so hard, these last few months.”

And they have, they have been working hard. Riku, traveling to every world they know Sora’s been to, occasionally taking Kairi along, when she wasn’t busy training. And she was almost always busy training, always studying, always working on her magic or her combat skills. When she wasn’t studying or practicing magic in the Land of Departure with Aqua, she was sparring with Roxas or Xion in Twilight Town, or letting Riku spirit her away to other worlds, taking out any heartless that remain.

She will not let what happened to her during the war occur again. Kairi will make sure no one ever gets the drop on her like that again for as long as she lives.

Every mission that ended with them finding no hint of Sora broke their hearts a little, every time. But they won’t give up on finding him. They couldn’t. The idea of Sora, gone forever, eternally out of their reach after being apart for so long was unacceptable.

“We’re going to find him, Riku,” Kairi stressed, not looking away from him for a second. He had to understand - he had to. “We’re going to find him, and then we’re going to kick his ass for leaving us like this.”

Riku huffed out a laugh at that, and some of the clouds cleared away from his eyes. “He really is going to get an earful for this one.”

“He is! There’s going to be a line halfway down the islands of people that want to yell at him for scaring us like that!”
They snickered at each other over the image, laughter that was quickly broken by Kairi’s sudden yawn.

“Yeah, it is pretty late, isn’t it.” Riku pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket, checking the time, “wow, a little after three. Kai, we need to sleep.”

“I don’t wanna go back to sleep,” she murmured. “Can’t I stay with you?”

“We’re too old for sleepovers now. What would our parents say?”

“That hasn’t stopped us before and you know it.”

Riku didn’t bother to give a response, which meant she was absolutely right, but her smugness didn’t stop him from tightening his grip on her knees and hefting her off the tree, leaving her to squeak in surprise and wrap her arms around his shoulders.

“We’ll have a sleepover another day, then. Right now, I’m taking you back home.” Riku hitched Kairi up to get a better hold, making her squeak again at the sudden movement, and began to head to the shore, where two rowboats were waiting, side by side.

“We’ll have to leave one of the boats.”

“Yeah. We’ll grab it later, tomorrow.” Riku gently lowered her into the boat before settling down himself and starting the short trip back to the main islands.

Halfway through the short trip, Kairi sighed, leaning over to the side of the boat. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to go back to sleep.” Kairi softly admitted, folding her arms against the salt-stained wood as they gently rocked towards home. “I miss him, Riku. I miss him every second.”

It took Riku a minute to speak, the only sound being the waves lapping against the boat, but when he finally did, it was whisper soft. “I miss him too, Kairi. Not having him here, with us…” He inhaled sharply, “it hurts.”

The rowboat gently slid onto the shore, and Kairi crawled forward to place a hand on Riku’s arm as he put the oars to the side, covering a hand over his eyes as if that would stop the traitor tears slipping down his cheeks.

Kairi quickly wiped them away, squirming into his space and winding her arms around him as tight as she could, pressing a fierce kiss into his temple. “We’re going to get him back,” she swore fiercely, “I swear, Riku, no matter what. We will.” More tears poured out, and Kairi was tired. She was so tired of crying; she felt as though she’d cried oceans already, these past few months, but it never stopped.

“Okay.” Riku’s voice was thick with tears, and he gripped at Kairi, held onto the back of her jacket with tight fists. “No matter what. I know we will.”

They stayed in that rowboat, clinging to each other until the sky turned pale with the dawn.

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“Hey.”

Kairi blearily stared up at the eternal sunset of Twilight Town, wondering for a second when she ended up on the ground. Her right side was throbbing, and she wondered if there was already a bruise; that’s what she gets for doing this on no sleep, she supposes.

Her absent staring was quickly interrupted by Roxas, Keyblade stowed away as he placed his hands on his hips, a tiny wrinkle of concern between his brows.

“You haven’t fallen for a move like that in weeks,” Roxas said, holding out a hand to help her up. “Are you good?”

“Yeah,” Kairi let the word out in a sigh, dispelling her Keyblade and accepting Roxas’ hand, letting him pull her to her feet.

“I dunno, Kairi, you look kinda dead.”

“Damn, Roxas, you sure know how to make a girl feel good.”

“Well you do!!”

“Roxas!” Xion called out from where she was sitting with Naminè, sipping from her bottle of water, “Is Kairi alright?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think we should spar anymore today!” he called back, “Kairi isn’t feeling well!”

“I’m fine,” she grumbled halfheartedly, letting Roxas lead her over to the benches where Xion and Naminè were sitting, watching as Roxas and Kairi sparred in the sandlot.

“You’re not fine.” Naminè said flatly, handing Kairi a bottle of water as she took a seat, “you came home so late last night, I doubt you got any sleep. I don’t know why you tried to do any sparring today, you should rest.”

Kairi made a face at her, and Naminè made a face right back, unrepentant at tattling on her.

“Kairi, spill.” Roxas demanded, “You could’ve told us you were tired, we could’ve just hung out like normal. What’s wrong?”

Biting her lip, Kairi rolled her water bottle between her palms, staring down at her lap and determinedly not looking at anyone.

“…. I had a dream.” She finally admitted, “About Sora. And when I woke up, I saw that today’s his birthday.”

Roxas stiffened as Xion inhaled sharply, her face twisting in sadness, and Naminè reached out and pried one of Kairi’s hands off the water bottle, lacing their fingers together. “Oh, Kairi…I never knew. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Kairi squeezed her hand, smiling sadly, determined not to cry; she cried plenty last night. “We never said anything, so no one would’ve known.”

“Are you doing okay? Is Riku okay?”

“Yeah…yeah, we’re fine.” Kairi looked up at Roxas, staring hard at the ground, still frozen stiff at
the reminder of their loss, and placed her water bottle on the bench to free up her other hand. Leaning forward, she grabbed Roxas’ hand in a loose hold, and gently squeezed until he was looking at her with wide brown eyes.

“I remember, before the war, Sora was telling us about the bistro here. That there was this little chef, and he made the most amazing fruit tart he ever had.” Kairi smiled, and this time it wasn’t as sad, “I was going to go to the bistro anyway, to see if I could get a cake made before I went to see Sora’s parents, if I make it in time. We should split a tart and see if it’s as good as Sora said.”

“That’s a good idea,” Xion piped up, “we’ve got plenty of munny, we can do it. Roxas, we should.”

“Lunch would probably be good, before Roxas takes us back home. We probably need it.”

“I…yeah.” Roxas’ voice was quiet, and he squeezed Kairi’s hand back, “yeah, we can do that.”

Quiet, the four of them gathered up their things and headed towards the bistro, arms around each other like a small human chain.

Sora was right; the fruit tart was delicious.

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“Okay, Riku said he’s waiting for us?”

“At the play island,” Kairi confirmed, tucking her phone into her pocket, juggling the small cake box in her other hand.

“And then you’re going right to Sora’s parents?”

“Yeah. I should have time, I wasn’t gone for very long.”

“Alright.” Roxas adjusted his black coat, tugging on his gloves, “coats on, right? You ready?”

“Oh, just a second. Naminè, can you hold the cake?”

Naminè took the cake box from Kairi, holding it in her left hand as Kairi held her free hand, reaching out to grab Roxas’ hand to make a chain. “Okay, now we’re ready.”

Roxas rolled his eyes, and with a wave of his hand, a dark, splotchy portal appeared, “I know you don’t like this, Kairi, so hold tight; I’ll go fast.”

Kairi grit her teeth as Roxas tugged her and Naminè through the dark portal and closed her eyes as the bitter metallic taste of darkness coated her tongue. The cold inky spread of the darkness was repelled some by the Organization coats Xion and Lea let them borrow, which was a relief; if she had to travel through the portals without them, she’d be sick.

“Hey, you can open your eyes.” Roxas gave her hand a squeeze, “We’re here.”

Her eyes slowly fluttered open, taking in the blue skies of home, the hush of waves hitting the
shore, and Riku, who turned to them with a smile as they appeared.

“Welcome back,” Riku said warmly. “That wasn’t so long. Did you have a good time in Twilight Town?”

“Yes!” Kairi smiled as Riku helped her out of the Organization coat; it was Lea’s, and was comically large on her, her frame practically drowning in it. “We went to the bistro for lunch and split a fruit tart. And I got the cake!”

Naminè stepped forward at the mention of the cake, placing the small box into Riku’s hands so she could pull down the hood of her own borrowed Organization coat.

“Thanks, Naminè. Ready to go, Kairi?”

“Yeah.” She smiled, and the gesture was a little strained, “I’m…I’m honestly a little nervous, to be honest. We didn’t really -the last visit wasn’t-”

Riku grabbed her hand, “Kairi. Don’t worry too much. Aouli and Jun will be happy to see us. It’ll be good for us to spend the day together, at least for a little while.” He turned to Roxas and Naminè, “I’m sure Kairi’s already told you our plans to see Sora’s parents; do you want to come along?”

Naminè looked torn, but Roxas was already shaking his head, “thanks, but-but I don’t think I’m ready for that, yet.” He looked a little pained, and Riku nodded in understanding, “offer’s always there, whenever you want it. I think they’d be happy to meet you.”

Roxas nodded stiffly in thanks, “I think I’ll just take Naminè home before I go, if that’s alright.” He offered a hand to Naminè, and she took it with a smile before turning to Kairi, concern in her eyes. “I’ll see you when you get home. And Riku, make sure Kairi gets some rest; she tried to spar on little to no sleep while we were in Twilight Town, and it went as well as you’d expect.”

“Naminè-!”

She stuck her tongue out at Kairi, definitely not sorry for, once again, tattling, before breaking out into giggles as Roxas tugged her into her freshly made getaway, the dark portal vanishing behind them in a blink.

Riku was at her back, and even then Kairi could still feel the disapproving stare Riku aimed at her and fumed silently. “Is this what having a younger sister is like?” she demanded. “Is this how it feels? ‘Cause I don’t like it.”

“Don’t ask me, I’m the only child. Kairi, you know you shouldn’t have done any sparring.”

She sighed loudly, exasperated, “I know, but I just –” she bit her lip, “I just don’t want to get left behind.”

It felt silly when she admitted it, but it didn’t make it any less true; she’s been working so hard to catch up to everyone, and even with all the progress she’s made in the past few months, she feels like it’s never enough.

“Kairi,” Riku stepped closer to her, “it’s alright to miss a day when you’re not feeling well. If you try and make it happen anyway when you aren’t at your best, you make more mistakes that way.”
“Yeah, I know. I know, Riku.” Kairi’s shoulders slumped a little, “Sorry. If it makes you feel better, Roxas saw through me right away and called it.”

“Good. Did you get hurt anywhere?”

“My side, but it’s fine. Already Cured it.”

Riku squinted at her for a minute, but eventually nodded in acceptance when Kairi just squinted back at him. “Alright, then. Let’s head to Sora’s.”

“We’ll get to be responsible and bring the other boat back to the main islands, at least.”

Riku huffed a small laugh at that.

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Aouli looked surprised to see them standing at the doorstep, eyes widening in shock. “Kairi? And Riku! What a nice surprise, we haven’t seen you since – since, well.”

He coughed, and the air only turned awkward for a second before he waved it away, stepping aside to give them space. “Come in, come on in! Jun is taking a quick walk, but she should be back any minute now. What do I owe you for this lovely visit?”

“Oh, well, we just wanted to check in and stuff since today’s – uh. Um. Since today’s –”

“We wanted to celebrate Sora’s birthday with you two.” Kairi cut in, stopping Riku’s nervous stammering. “We brought you some cake. One of Sora’s favorites.”

Aouli’s mouth dropped open a little as he stared at the small cake box, and a slight sheen of tears covered his eyes. “Oh,” he croaked, “oh, I thought – I thought, well. It doesn’t matter what I thought. Let’s – let’s wait ’till Jun comes back, and then we can cut the cake.”

He smiled at them, and there were definitely tears in his eyes, and Kairi felt her eyes fill up in response. “Kairi, Riku…thank you. Thank you so much. This is wonderful.”

Kairi quickly swiped at her eyes as the two of them were led to the kitchen, where Aouli quickly sat them down before setting a kettle up at the stove, beginning to make tea for the soon to be four of them.

“So, tell me how you two have been!” He prompted, turning back to face them when the kettle was on, leaning against the counter and crossing his arms. “It’s been such a long time since we’ve seen you two. You doing well in school? And Kairi, when am I going to meet this sister of yours? And don’t make that face, you know how quickly gossip spreads across the islands.”

“Ah- well…” Kairi scratched at her cheek, “I did extend the invite to Naminè – that’s my sister’s name - but since today’s… since it’s today, she asked for a raincheck instead. I’ll bring her along next time I visit, I promise.”
“Good, good.” Aouli then turned his sharp eyes to Riku, who stiffened and sat straighter in his seat, “Don’t think I’ve forgotten you, Riku. Is school going alright? How are your Moms doing? Jun and I saw Nanami and Minato when we went shopping over the weekend, but we weren’t able to talk long.”

“They’re good!” Riku perked up a little at the mention of his mothers, and smiled, “they’re really happy I’m back home for good, after all the stuff from a couple years ago. I really scared them, after that storm. And school is fine; I’ll be finishing up for good this year.”

The high whistle of the kettle interrupted whatever Aouli was going to say, and he turned to attend to it, pouring three cups full of hot water, teabags already waiting. Kairi hopped up to grab the cream and sugar, having been over so many times she didn’t need to ask for the location, and soon the three of them sat around the table with their tea, the scent of orange and bergamot wafting up to them.

“I’m happy for you, Riku.” Aouli spooned a few spoonfuls of sugar into his tea, swirling the spoon around, “I know it was hard, getting back in the swing of things after such a long absence.”

“…Yeah. It was. My Moms helped a lot, though. And everyone was really understanding, so I…it was fine. I’m just proud I made it.”

Aouli smiled, his eyes crinkling in the corners in a way that achingly reminded Kairi of Sora. From the distance, they heard the door open, and a voice call out, “I’m back!”

“Junie!” Aouli sprang to his feet, “Welcome home! You’ll never believe it, guess who came to visit!”

“Is it your mother again? It better not, she was just here last week-” Sora’s mother stepped into the kitchen and gasped softly when she saw Riku and Kairi sitting at the table. “Riku, Kairi-”

Kairi inhaled sharply as well, as her eyes zeroed in on the soft swell of Jun’s stomach under her blouse. “Oh,” she said weakly, looking back up to meet Jun’s wide eyes, “we just, um -it’s Sora’s birthday so, we just, y’know -we have cake?”

“Ah,” Aouli said quietly, “I forgot. We never got to tell you.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell him?” Riku asked quietly, “What you wanted to tell Sora, before he -before he disappeared?”

Jun nodded, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, “we’d found out a week before, that month, but could never get a minute to tell him. You three had been pretty scarce, at the time. And then…” She shrugged, helpless, “But -yeah. We’re having a baby. Sora is going to be a big brother.”

“Wow,” Kairi breathed, and a smile tugged at her lips, “wow, I-Jun, Aouli, congratulations! We -you -let’s have cake!” She blushed a little at her outburst, but kept going, “today is supposed to be a happy day! It’s Sora’s birthday, and you two are having a baby! This is wonderful!”

“Yeah, it really is,” Riku agreed, a tiny smile on his face, “congratulations. That really is good news.”

Jun’s shoulders relaxed, and Kairi felt guilty at the thought that she ever needed to feel tense in the
first place. She smiled, and Kairi got a reminder of who Sora got his bright smile from, “Thank you Kairi, Riku. I’m happy this baby will be surrounded by such good people.”

All three of them soon realized that Jun was still standing in the doorway, and Aouli quickly poured her a cup of tea while Riku sprang up to escort Jun to the table, placing her in the empty seat next to Kairi.

She gave Riku a gentle pat on the cheek as thanks before taking her seat, leaving him pink cheeked and bashful, and squeezed Kairi’s hand with a grin. “Alright, so where’s that cake?”

Riku unboxed the cake, and all four of them ooh’d and aah’d over the whipped display of the icing, strawberries and rich chocolate wafting up to greet them.

“Oh!” Kairi snapped her fingers, “Candles!!! We should -do you have any candles, anywhere?”

“Ah, well…. we might have some in the drawer under the stove?”

Kairi went where she was instructed, digging through the drawer until she held up four small birthday candles with a triumphant smile. “Since it’s a birthday cake,” she explained as she stuck the candles into the cake, “we’ve got to do all the birthday traditions. Okay, close your eyes.”

“Close -why?”

“It’s a magic trick! Just trust me! It’s gonna be really cool!”

Aouli gave them a skeptical squint before closing his eyes along with his wife, and Kairi cast a quick Fire spell, a gentle flame coming to life on each candle.

“Okay, open your eyes.”

Their eyes fluttered open, and they gasped at the lit candles, the gold glow gently filling the air around them. “Jun, Aouli,” Riku whispered, “time to sing, okay? One, two, three –”

In soft voices, the four of them sang Happy Birthday to Sora, their voices cracking every now and then but still holding the tune. As they finished the song, Aouli was definitely crying at this point, and Jun wiped at her eyes. “Alright.” Kairi said gently, “now we’ve got to blow out the candles. Everyone got their wish ready?”

Everyone nodded, Sora’s parents still sniffling quietly, and Riku met her eyes for a second before they closed their eyes, ready to blow out the candles.

Sending her desperate wish up to any Gods listening, to the light that watched over all the worlds, Kairi blew out at the candles.

Please…let us find Sora. Please bring him back to us.

Wisps of grey smoke drifted around them, and Kairi smiled, no traces of sadness to be found. “Let’s cut the cake.”

They spent the remainder of the afternoon there, catching up with Sora’s parents, promising that
they’re still looking for him, too, and by the time they left, the sun was starting to sink into the horizon. Kairi and Riku took a moment after walking a little distance from Sora’s home, sagging into each other as they stared at the pink and gold hues of the sunset.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this tired.” Kairi sighed, pressing her forehead into Riku’s chest. “It’s another day now, I want that sleepover.”

Riku let out an exaggerated sigh, hands finding their usual home on Kairi’s waist, “fine, fine, we can nap for a while, but then I’m taking you home. You’re gonna blow our cover.”

“It’s been over six months and the islands are full of gossips.” Kairi said darkly, “they probably knew we were all a thing by the third month.”

Riku paled slightly at the thought, “my moms might know. I didn’t even get to tell them myself. Oh my god.”

“You’ve gotta accept it at this point,” Kairi said soothingly, “I’m pretty sure my dad knows, but he hasn’t brought up the courage to talk to me about it yet. You know how small the islands are, Riku.”

He sighed again, just as loud and exaggerated as the first, “I guess.”

“Sleepover now.” Kairi wheedled, tugging at the hem of his shirt, “I feel like I’m about to fall asleep standing up.”

“Alright, drama queen, let’s go.”

“I’ll love you a million times if you carry me.”

Riku protested, but that didn’t stop Kairi from putting all her training to good use, climbing her way up Riku’s back and holding on tight. He made a big show of protesting the whole walk to his house, but didn’t put her down until they were inside, hollering a greeting to his mothers as he toed off his shoes. Kairi kicked off her shoes and called out her own greeting before she was tugged up the stairs to Riku’s room, where they flopped onto the bed with a large sigh, covers fluttering around them with a soft *fwomp*.

“Today was good,” Kairi said, gently brushing Riku’s hair out of his face so she could see him. “Right? I feel really good about today.”

Riku hummed, eyes fluttering open to stare at her, and he smiled, “Yeah. I’m glad we went to visit. Sora would be pissed if we didn’t take care of his folks.”

“So pissed.” Kairi agreed, and the two of them shared a soft laugh. They spent a minute in silence just staring at each other, Kairi enjoying the colors of the sunset playing in Riku’s eyes. He has one of the loveliest pairs of eyes she’s ever seen – she’ll never get tired of looking. “Do you think…do you think your wish will come true?”

Riku blinked slowly, and he broke eye contact, his eyes drifting down to stare at her collarbone. “… I don’t know.” He finally said. “I hope it does. Do you?”

“Yes,” Kairi readily admitted, winding her arms around his shoulders and pulling him close, “with
all my heart.”

They fell asleep after that, foreheads touching, gentle puffs of air brushing against their cheeks, and they did not wake until the morning.

-o-

Time passed, and Kairi continued on with life.

She continued her training, keeping up with sparring and magical studies while also keeping up with school. When she wasn’t doing that, she was with Riku, continuing their travels to worlds to find some trace of where Sora could’ve gone.

Each search turning up with nothing.

Eventually, the summer months came around, and Riku turned nineteen.

His mothers threw a small party for him, inviting Sora’s parents and the other island teens the trio played with when they were younger. Kairi brought Naminè along and made sure to send out an invite to Xion and Roxas. They set up a small gathering on the beach, a small table nearby laden with snacks as people lounged on blankets and talked. Roxas and Xion did show for the party, Lea tagging along with them, and Xion spent some time walking down the shore and hunting for shells with Naminè before getting pulled into a race by Lea, Roxas, and Riku.

Kairi was laying on the towel she brought, drying off from her long swim in the ocean when Naminè came to sit next to her, adjusting the large floppy hat she wore, her loose coverup swaying with the breeze.

“Need more sunscreen?” Kairi checked in as Naminè sat, and she shook her head, hat wiggling with the movement. “I’m good, thank you. I will probably need some juice, later.”

“I’ll get you some in a bit. Are you having fun?”

“Yes!” Naminè smiled brightly, “I really like birthday parties. And I’m happy for Riku – he deserves to have a little fun.”

Kairi pushed herself up onto her elbows, eyes quickly finding Riku; he was out in the surf, tossing a frisbee around with Lea, Xion, and Roxas. Riku flicked the frisbee toward Lea and bent over laughing when Lea misjudged where the frisbee would go and lunged forward too far, tumbling into the water face-first.

“Yeah,” Kairi agreed, a soft, gooey feeling in her chest, “I think everyone deserves to have a little fun, now.”

Naminè grinned at her, and Kairi smiled back, pushing herself to her feet, “I’m gonna go swim a little more. Do you want to come?”
“Oh.” Naminè looked shocked, “I -I don’t…I don’t know how to swim.”

She looked down at her hands, fingers twisting nervously in her lap, and Kairi frowned at that.
“Well, I can teach you!”

Kairi offered her hand, and Naminè stared at it, dazed, “I-

“It’s super easy, once you get the hang of it.” She swore, “and I won’t let go of your hand the entire time, I swear. We won’t go too far out, either, if you’re nervous about that.”

Naminè bit her lip, considering, eyeing the calm, endless blue of the ocean, “I – I guess…. alright.” She took Kairi’s hand and let her pull her to her feet. “Great! You’ll be great at this, I promise. Okay, you’ve got to ditch the hat and the cover, so it won’t get wet.”

“Ah…. alright.”

After leaving her hat and cover neatly folded on Kairi’s towel, Naminè tightly gripped at Kairi’s hands as she slowly backed into the water, guiding Naminè on with a gentle voice.

They occasionally took breaks for food and reapplication of sunscreen, but the time sunset came around, Naminè and Kairi were drifting along in the sea, floating on their backs and looking at the changing colors of the sunset, hands still clasped tight.

“Everyone!” Nanami called out, waving to get their attention, platinum hair slipping out of her ponytail, “Out of the water, it’s time for cake!”

That got everyone’s attention, and Xion and Roxas scrambled out of the shallow part of the water, throwing handfuls of seashells on their towels before running to where Riku and Sora’s parents waited, Jun helping Minato place candles in the cake. Riku trotted after them, wringing the remaining water out of his hair, and Lea followed Naminè and Kairi’s sedate pace, tucking his hands behind his head.

“Been a long time since I’ve been part of a shindig like this,” Lea said casually, watching Riku’s mothers place the cake in front of Riku before pressing kisses into his hair, laughing at the blush that spread across his cheeks.

“Yeah?” Kairi looked back at him, “did you have a good time?”

“I…I really did, yeah.” Lea smiled, a small thing, “thanks for letting me come along.”

“Kairi!”

She turned as Xion skipped towards them, beaming; she was already toasty from the sun, her brown skin a deeper hue, a scattering of freckles spread across her nose and cheeks. “We’re about to sing a birthday song to Riku! And then we get cake! Thank you for inviting us, today was so fun!! I took a lot of pictures, so I’ll make sure I’ll send mine to you!”

“Of course I’d invite you, it wouldn’t be the same without you! I’ll make sure to send you the pictures I took, too!”
“Alright, Kairi, bring your friends in!” Minato called out, “Riku’s ready for his happy birthday song!”

“Ma.”

“Coming!” Kairi laughed, and as she skipped up, everyone else coming up in the rear, she made sure to unlock her phone and make sure that her video camera was on to capture every second of Riku squirming in pleased embarrassment as everyone sang to him at the top of their lungs.

-o-

Kairi pressed her cup to her lips and took a slow sip as she looked out at the ocean, closing her eyes as the warm air brushed her face.

Riku’s party wrapped up after the sun fully set, stars peppering the sky as Riku’s mothers broke out a bottle of paopu wine, serving a glass for themselves, Aouli, and Riku, who was able to finally drink alcohol.

Aouli snuck a glass to Kairi with a wink, and Jun elbowed him in reprimand but quickly shoo-ed Kairi away, rolling her eyes.

“You know you’re not allowed to have that.”

Kairi looked up as Riku sat next to her, his own glass dangling from his hand, eyebrow raised. She scoffed, “Bah, eighteen is close enough, isn’t it? Besides, Aouli gave it to me, it’s fine.”

“If you say so.”

They fell silent after that, sipping at their glasses and looking out at the water, pressed against each other from shoulder to hip.

“Today was really good.” Riku smiled, “I really needed this. I’m glad you were here to celebrate with me.”

“Riku, don’t be stupid.” Kairi elbowed him gently, “there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

His smile faded a little at that, but he didn’t say anything, looking back up at the tiny pinpricks of stars. Kairi looked up with him, wrapping her arms around her knees, tapping the bottom of her glass against her knee as she thought.

“Did you know that I can feel it?” Riku looked over at her, confused, and Kairi stretched out an open hand, explaining further, “the light. I can feel the light of all those worlds. Hundreds upon hundreds.

“It’s a little more concrete, if I’m closer. Like, I can feel you, and Roxas, and Xion and Lea. Your parents, Sora’s parents. I can feel, like…all the light in this world.”

She shrugged, taking another sip from her glass, “I’m pretty sure it’s a Princess of Heart thing, but
I’m still getting the hang of it.”

Looking back up at the stars, Kairi sighed, “all the light in all the worlds…I know Sora’s light as intimately as yours, but no matter how hard I look, how hard I reach, I can’t feel him anywhere.”

Riku said nothing, but Kairi felt him lean in and press his cheek to the top of her head, and that was good enough for her.

“Today was fun.” Riku finally said, “but it would’ve been a lot more fun if Sora was here to enjoy it with us. Part of me feels a little bad, that I had so much fun, while he’s out there, alone. But I know he’d hate it that I felt like that.”

“He’d kick your ass.” Kairi agreed, switching her cup to her left hand so she could grab Riku’s hand, lacing their fingers together.

“I was thinking of going back out there, soon. Maybe in a few days. To get back to searching for him.”

“So soon? Riku, we’ve been to all the worlds Sora’s been to, even some he hasn’t –”

“That means we probably just need to keep looking. Keep going further.”

“That might be a little dangerous, Riku. That’s uncharted territory. I’m with you, no matter what, but I’ll need a few days to get ready.”

Riku set his jaw, but said nothing, taking another sip from his cup, and Kairi sighed, leaning against his arm.

The beach was quiet now, Lea taking Roxas and Xion home after partaking in his own glass of paopu wine, Naminè escorted home by Sora’s father. Jun stayed behind with Riku’s parents, and the five of them finished cleaning up the remains of the party before departing, offering Jun a ride home so she wouldn’t have to walk, her belly at seven months giving her a bit of a wobble to her walk.

It was just the two of them, and as Kairi leaned into Riku and took in his silence, she swirled the remaining wine around in her glass as a feeling of foreboding sank into her gut.

“Hey, Riku.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think paopu wine counts?”

“Counts for wha –?”

His question died on his lips as Kairi pressed the rim of her glass against his lower lip, and Riku looked at her with eyes so big she almost wanted to laugh.

“Kairi.”
“Riku.”

“You know you don’t have -I know you and Sora –”

“I’m gonna stop you, because I can already tell this is going to be really, really dumb.” Kairi laughed a little when Riku’s mouth snapped shut with a ‘clack’, cutting off whatever he was going to say, before giving him a serious look.

“I’ll say it a million times if I have to – I want it to be the three of us, always. No matter what, I will always want you to be in my life. Do you want that, Riku?”

“Kairi, I -?”

“Do you?”

He swallowed heavily, adam’s apple bobbing with his nerves, “…Kairi…yes. Of course I do.”

“Okay. Then do you want to share this with me?”

Riku let out a shaky breath and shook his head, his voice apparently failing him. He pressed the rim of his glass to Kairi’s lower lip, and she smiled at him, the glitter of the stars reflecting in her violet eyes.

The wine tasted a little sweeter that way, somehow.

-0-

A few days later, Kairi awoke with a renewed sense of foreboding in the pit of her stomach.

Part of her already knew, but she needed to check, needed to be sure.

Naminè had woken up before her, her side of the bed empty and cool, and Kairi threw the covers off her and sat up, reaching for her phone. This time, she picked up her gummiphone, and left her regular phone on the dresser; she had a feeling she wouldn’t need that one.

Still in her pajamas, she quickly brushed her teeth, threw on some sandals, and slipped downstairs, leaving a note for her father and Naminè before running to Riku’s house. By the time she got there, panting, sweat plastered strands of her hair to her temples, gummiphone still clutched tight in her fist.

Knocking on the door, Kairi attempted to pat her hair into some semblance of tidiness, trying to calm her racing heart. Nanami answered the door, eyebrows quirking up in surprise as she took her in, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Kairi? What’s wrong, what do you need?”

“Sorry for coming over unannounced but – I just, I was looking – have you seen Riku, lately?”

“Riku?” A concerned wrinkle appeared in her brow, “No, Minato and I saw him last night, before bed, but we haven’t seen him since. I just assumed he woke up early and was with you. Did
something happen?”

Kairi’s stomach sank, and she really hoped that it didn’t show in her face.

She squeezed her gummiphone, “…no,” she finally croaked, “no, nothing really happened. I was just looking for him, but I - I think I have an idea where he went.” Kairi took a couple steps back from the door, already turning away from Riku’s mother, “sorry for worrying you, Nanami, I’ll – I’ll see you later –”

“Kairi, wait –”

But she was already gone, running for the beach.

Kicking off her sandals, Kairi waded into the water, stopping once the cool water lapped around her ankles, taking a deep breath to steel herself before looking at her gummiphone.

There was a message from Riku.

Hurt already cramping her stomach, she unlocked the phone to read what he sent.

The text simply read ‘I’m sorry, Kairi. I’ll try and find him.’

Kairi let her breath out in a rush and dropped the gummiphone to her side, the hurt in her stomach rising and spilling over into angry tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Riku you idiot.” Kairi hissed to herself, swiping at her eyes, furious, trying to stop crying, “You said we’d find him together. You promised. You idiot!!! I – I can’t -”

Kairi’s breath left her in an angry sob, and crouched down, curling into herself, not caring how wet her sleep shorts got from the seawater as she cried, loud and angry, into her knees.

-o-

The first couple of weeks, Kairi was so angry she ignored all his calls, pettily leaving the texts he sent to her unread or deleting them whenever he tried to check in.

She got most of her updates on his well-being through others, mainly Naminè, with the occasional desperate ‘please call your boyfriend’ from Lea.

She wouldn’t, though -not until she was ready. Kairi was still so mad she felt like she could breathe fire; if she tried to talk to Riku now, she’d surely say something she would regret, and as mad as she is, Kairi couldn’t bear to hurt Riku like that.

Knowing him, he was already beating himself up enough over this dumbass decision and didn’t that just make Kairi roll her eyes.
“You’ve got to talk to him eventually,” Naminè chided on the fourth week as they got ready for bed, Kairi plaiting her hair before they went to sleep, “you’re probably giving him an ulcer.”

Kairi snorted, running a brush through Naminè’s fine, blonde hair, “serves him right, then, for leaving me behind. I’m tired of being left behind -what is the point of my training if I don’t get to apply it in the worlds!”

Kairi’s hands were gentle in Naminè’s hair even though her voice was so upset, “he promised me, he said that we’d go out and find Sora together, bring him back home together. How could he just – how could he promise me that and then leave me behind?”

She quickly finished the braid, expertly wrapping a hair tie around the end before sitting back, hands twisting in her lap as Naminè turned to face her.

“I know you’re hurt, Kairi.” She placed her hand over Kairi’s tangled fingers, squeezing, “but ignoring him and keeping all this hurt bottled up…it won’t do you any good.

“You don’t have to talk to him tonight, or anything, but please…. try and reach out to him soon. It’ll get better once you tell him your feelings.”

Kairi huffed, unmoved, until Naminè gave her her saddest look, brown eyes wide and pleading, and she folded like a house of cards.

“Fine! Fine, I’ll…I’ll talk to him soon, I swear.”

Naminè smiled, giving Kairi another squeeze, “that’s all I ask.”

-o-

Kairi knew she was dreaming, because she was back in that empty, pressed in by a darkness so thick not even her light could pierce it.

She felt shattered, broken into thousands of pieces, and her back throbbed with every faint breath she took. She couldn’t see, couldn’t move, and felt the overwhelming pressure of tears behind her eyes at the thought of staying in this cold darkness, broken, forever.

Kairi didn’t know how long she was there, trapped in that oppressive dark; it could’ve been seconds, hours, days. She wanted to cry, wanted to scream and scream until her voice finally reached someone, but she felt the darkness press in on her at all sides, a vacuum, and knew no matter how much she hoped, no one would ever be able to reach her.

“Kairi!”

Suddenly, there was warmth. Suddenly, there was light, as warm, firm arms scooped her up from behind, broad hands folding over her middle and holding her tight. She could smell it, then – the warmth, dirt and sweat and blood. Kari looked down, somehow, and could see him, his warm brown hands, gritty with dirt and dried blood, laced over her belly.

Staring at these hands -warm, brown, scraped and bloody – all Kairi could feel was confusion.
These hands… she knew them.

Didn’t she?

Didn’t she know these hands?

She wasn’t sure. She didn’t think so.

“Kairi!” She could practically hear the smile in this voice, the relief. “I finally found you!”

She felt an ache in her chest, felt like this voice was well known, well loved…. but she couldn’t recall it at all.

How do you know me? She wanted to ask, but she couldn’t seem to get her voice to work, how do I know you? Who are you? Kairi tried to open her mouth to speak, wanted to turn and see who her strange savior was, but then the darkness that was crushing her shattered, the light blinding her, and she woke up to Naminè staring at her, a concerned look in her eyes.

“You were talking in your sleep,” she said quietly, curling deeper under the blankets, “you kept saying something, but I couldn’t really hear it. Are you okay?”

“I…. I don’t know.”

Kairi bit her lip, “I just -I feel like…I’ve forgotten something.”

Chapter End Notes

‘KAY.

I have no idea how some of y’all can do long chapters, this thing was 20 pages on my word doc and I was so stressed.

I'm sure some people noticed but I've changed some things, a little: giving naminè and roxas brown eyes, for one (everyone has blue eyes and it bores me tbh and when I was a kid and first playing kh I thought for the longest time roxas had brown eyes for some reason). making sora and xion Brown (hawaiian, in this case). giving riku good parents. making it sorikai 'cause Sora Has Two Hands and A Big Heart.

y'know, little inconsequential things.

regarding sora's parents: his father is aouli, which means blue sky, and his mother is jun, because when I saw the name meaning I had to do it 'cause with one of the translations her name can basically mean simple and clean. I'm deadass.

so, anyway! the beginning. here it is. I hope y'all like it, and will hopefully bear with me as I get this story together. I'll be starting work tomorrow for the summer, but I'll do my best to work on this as much as I can so I can exorcise this demon from my body.
comments and kudos are always cool, and I'll see y'all in chapter two. peace!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I uh. didn't expect to get chapter two out so fast. I'm a little astounded at myself.

so uhhhh hey yeah we're back, after less than two days, with chapter 2! holy fuck. and it's another LONG ONE, jesus wept. I don't know how some of y'all do this.

my whole thought process while writing this was 'how do I use the secret ending while like....not REALLY doing anything with the secret ending'. it's just so confusing, as secret endings usually are, but I did my best with it.

once again: unbeta'd, all edits done by me to the best of my ability. oh my god do I try.

ok go have fun with that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything around Kairi felt slightly off.

She couldn’t put her finger on what was so different about the world, now, but it was – like everything shifted slightly to the left, and she was left stumbling now and then. Kairi wondered if anyone else felt like this, like something was missing, even though the islands moved through the days as normal as ever.

And something was missing, she knew it. Kairi wanted to talk to Riku, wanted to ask him about this, even though anger still made her stomach hot, chest aching with the sharp sting of being left behind, once again.

But why had she been left behind? She tapped at her gummiphone with a frown, scrolling until she found the last message from Riku that she read.

‘I’m sorry, Kairi. I’ll try and find him.’

“Find who?” Kairi asked aloud, frustration coloring her tone. No matter how hard she tried to jog her memory, how hard she combed through her brain, she couldn’t figure out who on earth Riku thought was so important that he left her here to find them himself.

She felt it, though, somehow -she felt that they had to be someone so, so important.

It was driving her nuts.

Kairi did try and reach out to Riku, a week after waking up from that dream feeling like something
had been forgotten. Even though she was still so hurt, she sent multiple messages trying to check in, all of them unread. Whenever she tried to call him, all she got during the rare occurrences the gummiphone was able to connect was static.

It made her worry, the longer she didn’t hear from him. But what could she do? She barely knew where to begin in trying to search for him, and her helplessness grew as the days passed.

“Naminè,” Kairi finally said one night as they got ready for bed, “do you…do you feel like you’ve just forgotten something?”

“I…” Naminè frowned thoughtfully, slowly pulling her brush through her hair, “I’m…. not sure. Why do you ask?”

“Because, I –” Kairi hesitated, fiddling with a loose thread on her blankets. “Ever since I had that dream, I feel like I’ve forgotten something -someone important.”

“But -but who could -Kairi, there’s no one to forget.” That apparently didn’t sound right to Naminè, because her frown deepened as she paused in her brushing, “at least…. I don’t think there is. I’m not sure. Maybe…Kairi, have you talked to Riku about it?”

“I’ve tried.” Kairi flopped back onto her bed, frustrated, “but every time I’ve sent him a text, he’s never read it. Whenever I try to call him, if the gummiphone actually connects to him, all I get is static. It’s like…it’s like I can’t reach him. Like he’s gone somewhere so beyond us that not even I can get to him.”

Saying it out loud made the worry real, the helplessness over the fact that something might be happening to Riku, and there’s nothing she could do about it. Groaning, she rolled onto her side and shoved her face in the pillow by Naminè’s hip, worry twisting her gut into knots.

“Kairi, I’m sure Riku is okay, wherever he is.” Naminè set down her brush and began to braid her hair, looking down at the top of Kairi’s head. “Riku’s been on missions on his own plenty of times; I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. And he’s a Keyblade Master- no matter what happens, he’ll be able to handle it.”

“I should be there,” she muttered into the pillow, slightly petulant, “he shouldn’t have to do this alone. We were going to find him together.”

“Who?”

“I -what?” Kairi felt a slight chill run down her back as she lifted her head away from her pillow to stare at Naminè’s confused expression. “What did I say?”

“You said you were going to find him, with Riku. Who are you talking about?”

“I –” Kairi’s head spun at the question, at Naminè’s confusion, at the realization that maybe she isn’t the only one forgetting something, after all. “I…I don’t know. I can’t remember.”

“…Maybe we should sleep. I’m sure you’ll remember it in the morning.”

“Yeah…maybe.”
When she finally drifted off to sleep, Kairi dreamed that she was submerged in the middle of the ocean, bright, crystalline blue on all sides. Someone was holding her hand, pulling her through the water, and when she looked down, she saw a hand -brown, broad hands and long fingers, curled loosely around her wrist.

Kairi wrapped her hand around their wrist, feeling their pulse flutter against her fingers, and looked up to see who the hand belonged to. They felt so close, but no matter how hard she looked, squinting through the water, she couldn’t see anything, the bright sunlight and bubbles obscuring her vision.

In the morning, Kairi blinked against the sun’s rays streaming into her room, and the blank spot in her memory remained.

-o-

A month after Riku left, and two weeks after waking up with a hole in her memory, Kairi went to visit Aouli and Jun.

They're always so kind to her, making time for her and Riku ever since they were kids. Aouli always had snacks for them, sandwiches and tea and homemade fruit punch, always made from scratch. Jun was the one that taught her how to use shells to sew wayfinders together when she was young and new to everyone, told her old wives’ tales about the island and the myths and traditions the town kept alive.

They treated her and Riku like they were part of the family, which made sense since -since the islands were so close-knit, anyway.

That thought didn’t sit right with Kairi, fit around her like a jacket two sizes too small. Frowning, she shook the unsettled feeling off as the knocked on the front door.

“Coming!” she heard Jun call out and smiled when the door opened and Jun waddled into the frame, one hand cradled under her large belly.

Slowly crawling through the ninth month, Jun looked like she was ready to pop, smiling at Kairi as she moved aside to let her into the house. “Kairi! It’s so good to see you, how have you been? We haven’t seen much of you these past few days. Aouli, Kairi’s here!”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Kairi kicked her shoes off and followed Jun into the living room, giving her a helping hand and lowering her to the couch before taking her own seat. From the kitchen, she could hear Aouli puttering around, the soft clink of glasses as he put something together. “How have things been? How’s the baby?”

“She’s kicking the hell out of me,” Jun sighed, rubbing her stomach, “She could come any day now and I feel like I’m about to burst. I’m too old for this.”

Kairi laughed, “you’re not that old! Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I feel old, carrying this baby around. I don’t know what Aouli and I were thinking, deciding to have kids this late.”
“Have – huh?” Kairi frowned at that, that feeling washing over her again, everything slightly off-center as she felt that wave of forgetting, like what Jun said wasn’t quite right. “This is your first baby?”

Jun looked at her, raising a confused eyebrow, “Yes? Kairi, of course this is our first baby; I think I’d remember having another kid running around the house. Aside from you and Riku, of course.”

“Speaking of Riku, where has he been?” Aouli stepped into the living room, carrying a tray laden with cookies and three glasses of milk. He placed the tray on the table before taking his own seat with a pleased sigh. “We haven’t seen him around the islands, lately. Minato and Nanami have started to worry.”

“Ah. He…” Kairi reached for a cookie, nibbling at it, “I know he had to leave for something. I can’t remember what, though. But I’m sure he’ll be home soon.”

“Oh, he didn’t tell you why? That’s a shame- it would’ve been good to have some extra muscle around to help with the nursery.”

“Nursery?” Kairi perked up at that, “You got the nursery set up? Can I see it?”

“Yeah, yeah of course! It was just an old storage room, but the walls were already painted so I spruced it up a bit.” Aouli pushed himself up off the couch, gesturing up the stairs with a smile, “I can show you real quick, come on.”

His eyes crinkled when he smiled, and it felt so familiar suddenly that Kairi felt dizzy. ‘His eyes crinkled when he smiled, too’ she thought absently, but the errant observation faded away before Kairi could really focus on it.

As Aouli led her up the stairs and down the hall, Kairi paused for a second to stare at one of the doors halfway down the hall. It caught her eye for some reason, something about the door making her pause. It was shut tight, old glow in the dark stars stuck to it, a nail sticking out of the wood the only sign of something previously hanging there.

A wild impulse gripped her, and for a moment, Kairi wanted to open the door, wanted to go inside and see what was in that room.

But the compulsion passed, and Kairi stepped away from the door, shaking her head and continuing to follow Aouli to the nursery.

-0-

“Roxas.”

“Hm?”

“Something’s bothering me.”
"Okay?" He turned to look at her, giving her his full attention, chewing on his finished ice cream stick as he waited.

A couple of weeks after her visit with Aouli and Jun, Kairi went back to Twilight Town for one of her usual weekend sparring sessions with Roxas and Xion, Lea stopping by later to get some of his own practice in, still just as new to the Keyblade as Kairi was. She figured they’d be tired of sparring together, after all the time they spent together in that world Merlin created, training for the war.

But sparring with Lea again was as fun as it’s always been, and Kairi left the sessions feeling more invigorated than she felt in weeks.

“What is it, Kairi?” Xion leaned around Roxas to turn towards her as well, still working on finishing her own stick of ice cream.

“Well…” She fidgeted for a second, taking a bite out of her ice cream, “I just…feel like I’ve forgotten something. Something big. A…a someone, I think.”

“Oh,” Xion said as Roxas stiffened, eyes widening as his ice cream stick slipped out of his slack mouth and tumbled into his lap, “you too, huh?”

“Me too -?”

“You’ve forgotten something too?! Kairi!” Roxas burst out, “I thought I was the only one! I thought I’ve been going nuts for weeks!”

“It’s true.” Xion nodded, “A couple weeks ago he just burst into my room, completely freaking out. Lea and Isa had no idea what was up with him.”

“I thought-!” Roxas flushed a little, cheeks puffing out in his frustration, “I thought that – that something happened to you again! That they made me forget you! I just -” He sagged a little, and his eyes drifted down to his lap, “it felt like that again” he whispered. “It feels like I forgot something important. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t remember. It’s just, like…. a feeling. Sort of.”

“It’s okay, Roxas.” Xion picked up his hand, lacing their fingers together, “I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere ever again. And I get it…. that feeling. I kinda feel it, too. And Kairi does, too, I’m guessing.”

“Ye -Yeah!!” Kairi nodded, paying no mind to her melting ice cream, “I’d been feeling that for weeks! And I keep – I keep having dreams of a person, but no matter how hard I try I just –”

“- can’t see them.” Roxas finished, nodding. “I have, too, sometimes. Have you tried to talk to Riku about it?”

“I can’t,” Kairi said, despairing, “I’ve tried contacting him for weeks, but I can’t get through. I’m so worried that something’s happened to him, but I can’t get through.”

“Well…” He frowned, thinking, “what about Master Yen Sid? Or Master Aqua? Would they know something about this?”
“I…”

“It won’t hurt, trying for some answers, at least.” Xion advised, “we asked Lea and Isa about it, but they don’t know anything about what’s happening to us. But they’re Masters, and Aqua has all those books and things at the Land of Departure, so maybe you can find something there?”

“I guess….” Kairi sighed, “I can try. It wouldn’t hurt, seeing if they have any answers. I’ll try to visit them as soon as I can. Maybe this weekend, I -yeah. I’ll go see Aqua this weekend. I’m sure she’ll have something. Roxas, you should come along; you might be able to get some answers for this, too.”

Roxas made a face, “I’m not sure…. Ventus will probably be there and seeing him is still really weird.”

“Roxas, I swear, the two of you don’t look exactly the same.” Xion laughed, exasperated; Kairi felt that they’ve probably had this debate before. Multiple times, even.

“Xion he looks just like me. We have the exact same face!! If we didn’t dress different people would get confused!”

“Ven doesn’t look like you at all! He’s paler than you, and his eyes are green, like sea glass; yours are such a pretty brown.”

“You’d be pretty pale too, if you were stuck in a castle in a coma forever.”

“Roxas,” Xion elbowed him in the side, “come on. Plus, your hair is darker than his, kinda. And so are your eyebrows.”

“Plus, Ven smiles like an angel all the time, which is definitely the big difference between the two of you.” Kairi added, smiling mischievously, “when you aren’t neutral you mostly look like a pissed cat.”

“I do too smile, what the hell, Kairi!!”

Xion shouted a laugh while Roxas glowered at her, making the exact pissed cat expression she was talking about as Xion leaned into him, snickering.

“Seriously though, Roxas,” Kairi nudged him, getting back on track, “you really should come along. Aqua knows lots of magic, she might be able to help us out.”

“…I’ll think about it,” Roxas finally said, which was Roxas-speak for ‘yes, I’ll go’, and Kairi beamed at him.

Later, when it was nearing evening, Roxas brought Kairi home, guiding her through a dark portal after she received a tight goodbye hug from Xion. “Don’t give up, Kairi.” Xion whispered to her, “it’ll all be okay, you’ll see.”

Kairi didn’t say anything, but she stepped out of Xion’s embrace with a smile, squeezing her hands once more in farewell before Roxas led her through the portal to home.
Kairi never gets tired of the view of the Land of Departure, of the bright green hills and tall mountains, the quiet hum of flowing waters floating on the breeze. She took a moment to take everything in, shrugging off her borrowed Organization coat as the warm wind brushed her face.

“Wow,” Roxas closed the dark portal as he folded his own coat over his arm as he looked around, taking in the blue skies and green hills, the large golden chains that held the castle up, bound to tall mountain spires. “You weren’t kidding when you were telling me how impressive this place looks.”

“I know! I always take a little time to just…look, before I head to the castle. We should go, though; I sent a message to let Aqua know we were coming, so she’s probably waiting for us.”

Kairi led the way, taking them down the mountain summit that led to the forecourt of the castle, where Aqua was probably waiting for them.

“So, you’ve been training with Aqua for how long again?”

“A little over nine months, now,” Kairi answered, absently running her fingers over a blooming wild rosebush, stroking the soft petals. “I started a few weeks after –”

Her thoughts skipped like a record, and she frowned, trying to remember what she was about to say.

“After…. after…. the war. I just…couldn’t bear the thought of that happening again. I needed to get stronger, to catch up to everyone so I can protect them like I want to.”

“Kairi…” She didn’t have to turn around to see the sympathetic look on Roxas’ face, “you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

Smiling, Kairi shook her head, continuing down the path, “it’s fine. Even with all that time training with Merlin, I…I wasn’t really ready for a fight like that.” Her eyes closed, but only for a second, as a wave of guilt rose up in her gut, “I wasn’t completely ready, but I wanted to fight in the war anyway, because I didn’t want to sit by and do nothing while everyone I cared about got hurt.”

The forecourt of the castle slowly came into view, and Kairi sighed, “what’s happened, happened. I paid a price, and all I can do is get better so it never happens again.”

A spot of blue by the stairs caught her eye, and Kairi perked up when she saw Aqua sitting there, waiting for their arrival. “Oh, I see Aqua! We’re really close now, come on!”

Aqua pushed herself to her feet once the two of them came into view, and she smiled at them as they approached. “Kairi, it’s good to see you again! And you finally brought Roxas with you.”

“I told you I would!” Kairi turned back to look at Roxas, who was slightly hiding behind her, skittish, “Aqua’s really good at magic, like I said, but she’s more elemental focused.”

“Your use of light magic is very impressive,” Aqua broke in, smiling at Roxas. “It’s not my
specialty, but it would still be an honor to teach you what I can.”

“…Okay. Thanks.” Roxas smiled at Aqua, a tiny thing, and Kairi gave a tiny mental fist-pump in victory as she turned back to face Aqua. “Are Ven and Terra here, this time?”

“Terra’s here - I think he was in the library, last I checked - and Ven is still off world.”

Aqua’s smile was a little sad when she said that, leading them inside the castle “I miss seeing him around, but I understand him. A lot has changed, in our absence. Worlds are different, and some are just completely missing.”

“Missing?” Roxas looked confused at that, “There are so many worlds out there, hundreds –”

“And there used to be hundreds more,” Aqua finished. “So many worlds have fallen to the darkness. I don’t know if all of them were salvaged, when –”

She suddenly stuttered, stopping in the middle of the hall as she frowned, lips pressing into a thin line.

“…Aqua?” Kairi finally spoke, concerned, “are you okay?”

“I…” She shook her head, “sorry. I forgot what I was going to say.”

Ice raced down Kairi’s spine, and from that alone she knew, instinctively, that they would find no answers here. “Oh,” Kairi said weakly, “that’s… that’s fine.” She looked back at Roxas, lost on what to do, how to move forward, and he caught her eye before giving her a small nod, letting her know that he came to the same conclusion that she did.

“Aqua, you said that Terra was in the library?” Roxas looked away from her to focus on Aqua, who was still standing a few paces away, looking confused. “Let’s go there so we can say hi; that’s where we intended to end up, anyways.”

“Oh - yes!” Her confusion quickly slid away at the mention of Terra, and Aqua brightened back up, resuming leading them down the hall, “the library isn’t too far - we can get started on your search there. Hopefully we can find something.”

Aqua led them to two large oak doors, and pushed them open to reveal the large, spacious library, filled wall to wall with books and saturated in golden sunlight. Sitting by one of the window seats, reading, was Terra, who put his book down and stood up to greet them when they stepped in, brown eyes warm with happiness as he smiled.

“Hello,” he said, voice deep and soft as he walked forward to meet them, “it’s nice to, ah, finally meet you in person, I suppose. It was… rather hectic, the last time we saw each other. Aqua has told me a lot about you though, Kairi - I’ve heard you’re going to be quite the magic user, once you become a Master.”

Aqua laughed at the furious blush that spread to Kairi’s ears as she sputtered in embarrassment,
“it’s true, Kairi, don’t be embarrassed; you’ve been doing very well.”

“Ah, and you must be Roxas.”

He stiffened as all attention was pulled to him, coming back from folding his and Kairi’s coats over one of the chairs of the long table in the middle of the library. “Uh…yeah, that’s me. Hi.”

“Hello.” Terra smiled again, slightly amused at Roxas’ skittishness around the two of them, “I’ve been told you’re here to do some research, so don’t let me keep you. If you have any questions, I’m happy to try and help. I may not be Aqua levels of good, but my knowledge of magic is still pretty decent.”

“Terra, shush, you’re just as good as I am.”

“Completely false, but thanks for thinking so.”

Roxas laughed quietly at their light banter as he turned to Kairi, eyebrows raised expectantly. “Well…let’s get started.”

“Yeah.” Kairi smiled, trying to shrug off the discouraged feeling weighing down her heart, “let’s get to it.

They spent the day poring over books, taking notes and debating on magical theories, Aqua and Terra making sure they took the occasional break. They were in the library for hours.

By the time they left it was dark, the sky full of more stars than they’ve ever seen, and they returned home empty-handed.

-o-

After the visit with Aqua, Kairi had a hard time getting out of bed the next day. She was just so tired, the fruitless searching and lack of answers starting to get to her. She hated this, hated not knowing what was happening to her, this feeling of forgetting something painfully familiar. Roxas had started to suggest going to see Yen Sid, or to write King Mickey in a last-ditch effort to get some answers, but Kairi really couldn’t handle more disappointment now, and she declined.

Three weeks, since she’s forgotten -since apparently everyone’s forgotten. Almost two months since Riku left.

She missed him terribly; not being able to talk to him, to check and see if he was doing alright, hurt more than anything. Kairi wanted to see him, wanted to hold him, kiss him, and yell at him in equal measure, hurt and anger and longing all tangled up in knots in her chest.

Kairi sighed heavily and rolled over, her back to the door as she looked up at the sky through her window, holding a pillow to her chest.
Eventually, she dozed off, and when she woke up, it was to a broad hand rubbing in between her shoulder blades. “Kairi,” a quiet voice said, “are you awake?”

“Mmm.” She rolled over, rubbing her eyes, and looked up into the soft grey eyes of her father.

Keone smiled when she looked up at him, “there she is,” he murmured, brushing her bangs away from her face. “Is today a sad day, Kairi?”

A lump rose in her throat, choking her, and she nodded wordlessly, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes and sliding down her temples.

Her father always called them sad days -ever since she was a little girl, amnesiac and new to Destiny Islands. They were the harder days, days where Kairi would wake up screaming, crying about nightmares she couldn’t remember, begging her father to keep her safe. Begging him to keep out the dark.

“Oh, Kairi, no, don’t cry.” He tried to brush her tears away, helpless, “do you want to talk about it?”

“Mm-mm” She declined, voice thick with tears, shaking her head. “I d-don’t know if I can really describe it, I just –”

More tears poured out, and Kairi pressed the heels of her hands over her eyes, “I’m just tired,” she wept, “I miss Riku, and I have no idea where he is and I can’t talk to him or call him or anything, and I miss –”

Confusion rose up, the blank spot in her memory a yawning, gaping thing, and the distress that brought her just made Kairi cry even more. “I’m missing something!! I’m forgetting something and I don’t know what and no matter how hard I try I can’t find it!! And I’m just –”

She pulled her hands away to look at her father, eyes rimmed red, cheeks flushed and splotchy. “I’m tired. Dad, I’m tired, I don’t know what to do.”

Kairi felt like she was four years old again, crying about the destruction and the dark, as she pushed herself up and threw herself into her father’s arms, burying her face into his shoulder as she cried her heart out, big gasping sobs that echoed out into the empty room.

Her father said nothing, and held her as tight as he could, running his fingers through her hair and holding her together as she wept. When her tears finally dried up, Kairi pressed her damp cheek against her father’s equally damp shoulder, sniffing softly, her violent crying session leaving her feeling like a wrung-out washcloth.

Once she completely calmed, her father sighed, a quiet, shaky exhale, and rubbed a large hand down her back, soothing circles across her shoulders.

“My Kairi,” he finally said, voice sad, “ever since I took you in, I knew that you were the most extraordinary child. A father always knows these things, you know. I always knew that you were something special, and that because of that, you would experience pains that I would never
understand.”

Kairi stayed quiet as he spoke, still sniffling quietly, but she curled her fingers into his shirt to let him know she was listening.

“You have been through terrible things, things that I will never be able to comprehend - all I’ve wanted, since you were a child, was to protect you, to keep you safe from the monsters and the dark you screamed about. Even now, I still want to protect you. Keeping the dark out of here was easy -”

He gestured around the room, to Kairi’s well-loved nightlight that was plugged into the corner of the room, no longer used - she had no reason to fear the dark, anymore.

“- But, it’s a little harder to keep back the dark that goes on here.” He pulls back to tap Kairi on the temple and smiled sadly. “I can’t do much there, no matter how much I want to. All I can do is be here for you, just like this, and give you a shoulder to cry and snot all over when you need it.”

Kairi laughed wetly, wiping at her face, and her father smiled like it was the greatest accomplishment he’s ever done. “You will always be my extraordinary girl. I know that whatever it is you are missing, it will be found; things will turn to rights for you - they always do. And if not, I’m sure you’ll make it happen through your own power.”

“Thanks, dad.” Kairi said quietly, voice still a little wobbly, and she leaned in to give him one last hug.

“Now,” Keone pulled back, smiling. “how do you feel about breakfast for dinner? I don’t think Naminè has taken part in one of our grand pancake dinners yet.”

“Yeah…” Kairi smiled, and it was still a little small, but genuine, “pancakes sound good. Naminè will love it.”

When they went downstairs, Naminè was sitting in the living room, curled up in the corner of the couch, absently sketching. She hopped up when Kairi appeared and swept forward to give her a tight hug while their father moved into the kitchen, giving them a little privacy.

“I told dad that you weren’t feeling well,” Naminè whispered, “I didn’t know what else to do. Was that okay?”

“Yeah.” Kairi gave her a squeeze, “that was okay. Thank you, Naminè.”

Naminè smiled, and their father called out from the kitchen, “all right, girls! Wash your hands and then come in to help – it’s pancakes for dinner tonight!”

Kairi grinned when Naminè mouthed ‘pancakes??’ at her, confused, and began to tug her to the kitchen. “Just trust us, it’ll be great.”

She felt a little lighter, after crying it out to her dad, pouring out all the confusion and hurt that she’d been bottling up for the last few weeks being the big reset button she needed. Now she feels sharp again, back on level ground with a clearer head now that she was able to get all her frustrations out.
Kairi is grateful for Naminè, that she cared enough to reach out for help when Kairi needed it most. She’s grateful that she doesn’t have to deal with this hurt alone.

She is lucky, she thinks, as she watches her father instruct Naminè on how to get the perfect pancake batter, that she is so loved.

-o-

A little ways away from the main hub of the islands, there is a small corner of secluded beaches.

It’s a shady area, wrapped up by palm trees, and when the tide goes down, little pools are exposed, full of colorful ocean wildlife. This area of the beach has a tradition of being the birthing area for the people of Destiny Islands.

Every child from the islands was born on these beaches; even Kairi ended up there, washing up onto the shore after fleeing from the destruction of Radiant Garden. Looking at it now, her arrival on those beaches feels somewhat poetic.

The people of Destiny Islands always gave birth in the ocean -and now, after going into labor in the early hours of the morning, it was Jun’s turn.

It was a little after dawn when their father burst into the room, waking Kairi and Naminè up with a start. “Jun’s water broke,” he said in a rush, “Kairi, she’s asking for you.”

Kairi vaulted over Naminè out of the bed and quickly put her sandals on -she had no time to change, so the shorts and t-shirt she wore to bed would have to be enough.

She sprinted to the beach, and when she got there, Jun was pacing across the shore, hands pressed against her lower back as she took long, slow breaths. Aouli was a few feet away with the local midwife, tense, keeping an eye on her, and various family members were waiting nearby -Aouli’s mother, Jun’s father, and a small handful of brothers and sisters from both sides of the family.

“Jun!” Kairi called out as she neared the beach, “I’m here!” Stopping a couple feet away, Kairi bent at the waist, panting, before straightening up and pushing her sweaty hair out of her face. “I made it!” She gasped, “Are you doing okay? How are you feeling?”

“Kairi,” Jun laughed a little, “oh, you didn’t have to run! The midwife said I’m not fully dilated- it’s probably hours yet.”

“Hours? Really? I -ohhh” Kairi sighed, slumping onto the beach, “the way dad made it sound, I thought you were having the baby right now!!!”

“Oh, that Keone.” Jun really laughed this time, “if you want, Kairi, you can head back; Aouli can call when it’s a little closer.”
“No way!” Kairi snapped her head up to give Jun the stink eye, expression fierce, “I’m gonna stay the whole time! There’s no way I’m gonna leave!”

They way Jun smiled at her let Kairi know that she had made the right decision, and she settled down and prepared for a long wait.

As the morning passed on, Jun’s contractions slowly increased, and she stopped her pacing every time to breathe through it, eyes closed, jaw tense from the pain. Their families made sure that Jun got rest when she needed it, fed her fruit and ice chips to keep her hydrated as the sun rose higher in the sky, bringing more heat with it.

Kairi and Aouli took turns walking Jun down the beach, pausing with her when the stronger contractions hit, rubbing her back and reminding her to breathe.

“It’s strange,” Jun said quietly, during Kairi’s turn to walk her down the shoreline.

“What’s strange?” They had paused in their walking for a moment, standing in the surf and enjoying the water lapping at their ankles while they stared out at the horizon, the sunlight glittering like diamonds on the waves.

“I know I said that this baby was my first one, but I –” Jun bit her lip, not looking away from the water, “I feel like I’ve done this before. Isn’t that weird?”

Kairi didn’t know what to say, and before she could even open her mouth, Jun curled in on herself and rocked through another contraction, hissing through her teeth, “oh, oh, oh this is a bad one –”

Her voice cut off from the pain, and Kairi let Jun squeeze her hand as tight as she needed to, helpless in the face of so much pain.

Kairi didn’t let go, not for one second, when Jun announced that she needed to push, wading into the water, stopping once the water reached her knees, Kairi on one side of her, Aouli on the other.

Watching the labor was agonizing, Jun groaning and crying as she was coaxed by the midwife, and Kairi would cast a Cure spell if she could, cast a hundred of them, if it meant that she could take away some of the pain.

It was worth it, though -when the baby finally dropped into the midwife’s waiting hands, her tiny indignant cries echoing across the shore, it was worth it.

The midwife was all business, rinsing the infant off with a warmed bottle of water that she brought with her, wrapping her up in one arm and coxing Jun with the other to the shore, making sure that she was sitting in the wheelchair she brought before placing the baby in her arms.

“Oh wow,” Jun croaked, running a finger over the baby’s tiny forehead, brushing over the tacky clump of brown hair, “Aouli, look at her, wow.”

“She looks great,” he whispered, tears dripping off his chin, “you did great, Junie. You’re so amazing, I love you.”
“She’s so small,” Kairi said quietly, stunned, feeling like someone knocked her across the head with a Keyblade. She’s never really seen a baby up close like this, before, so she feels a little shaky, taking in something so tiny.

Just then, the baby grunted, squirming a little before opening her eyes, staring at all of them in confusion with cloudy blue eyes.

“Little Nalani, hi,” Aouli crooned, brushing a finger across a soft brown cheek, “are you looking at your mama? Do you see your Auntie Kairi? We’re so happy you’re here, beautiful girl.”

Kairi felt a hand cover hers, squeezing gently, and looked at Jun with large eyes. “Thank you, Kairi, for being here with us.” Jun said quietly as family began to close in, “I don’t know why, but….”

Her brow wrinkled as she thought, eyes tracing her new baby’s face, “…something felt missing.” She finally said. “It still does, I think. But having you here,” she smiled sadly, “it helped, some.”

-o-

About a week after Nalani was born, Riku returned to the islands.

Kairi wasn’t informed of this right away, because of course she wasn’t, and had to find out on her own later in the day, when she was coming back from a grocery run with Jun and Naminè, the two of them carrying the bags as Jun led them to her home, Nalani wrapped against her chest in a sling.

Kairi didn’t really notice it, at first, hitching the bags up her arms while she stared distractedly at the smoosh of Nalani’s chubby cheek against Jun’s collar as she slept.

Babies were so cute. Have they always been this cute? Kairi’s never seen one up close, so she wasn’t sure. Maybe Nalani had a special charm, different from other babies.

A prickle ran down her back, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, and Kairi turned when they reached the top of the hill to look at the play island, wondering what was going on that was making her feel so weird.

Squinting against the glare of the sun, Kairi froze when she saw a tiny, lone figure, far, far away, sitting on the curve of their tree at the play island, platinum hair lit up by the sun.

“Oh, you’re such a good baby.” she faintly heard Jun say over the pounding of her heart in her ears, “it’s so surprising. There’s barely a peep from you, you’re definitely different from your -”

“Kairi?”

She turned and Naminè was looking back at her, concerned, “are you alright? You just stopped, suddenly.”

“I think…” Kairi licked her numb lips, “I think I can see Riku. At the play island.”
Naminè froze, and her eyes darted over to the play island before going back to her, “…is that good?”

“I don’t know yet.” Kairi was feeling a whole lot right then, had no idea where to start, and took a long, slow breath, continuing to make her way up the hill.

“Kairi, what-?”

“I’ll deal with it later.” She said quietly, “I’ve waited two months, already; what’s a couple more hours, huh? Come on, let’s finish helping Jun with the groceries.”

Naminè hesitated for a second, looking back at the play island, but when Kairi kept walking, she quickly turned back to follow, finishing up their trek to Jun and Aouli’s home. As she helped put away the food, Kairi tried to plan, and figured out what she was going to say.

She was still hurt and angry at being left behind, outrageously so, and she had to let Riku know that leaving her behind like that was unacceptable. She felt disrespected, like maybe part of Riku believed that she would never catch up, that bringing her with him to search the worlds was a burden, as she was still more of a liability.

Kairi quickly said her goodbyes and left for the beach, her face twisting more into a scowl as the rowboats and the play island came into view. She hopped into one of the boats and quickly began to paddle her way over, cursing for a moment over the fact that she didn’t know any more elemental spells – she was so jittery a good burst of an Aero spell could probably send her flying all the way to the island.

Taking a boat was probably for the best – it gave her more time to think. More time to prepare.

As soon as the boat hit the land, Kairi was moving, swinging herself out of the boat and running to their tree. And there he was, sitting near his usual spot, looking down at his hands – Riku.

Kairi’s heart skipped a little as she took him in, emotions she tried to contain beginning to bubble up in her chest.

He looked so tired, dark circles under his eyes as he blankly stared at his hands, opening and closing them over and over. He was wearing the outfit that the good fairies gave him before the war, and they looked rumpled, disheveled, like he hadn’t slept in some time. His hair had grown a little longer in his absence, too, almost touching his shoulders.

“Riku!!” She yelled out as she ran to him, heart lodged firmly in her throat, and his shoulders stiffened slightly before he slowly turned to look at her.

He looked like a man about to face the gallows, and the feelings Kairi had bubbling up in her rapidly boiled up and spilled over.

She was sure Riku wasn’t expecting a hug or kiss from her yet, was probably prepared for a punch, at least - but he definitely wasn’t prepared for the fireball she threw at him. Even though he looked so tired, his reflexes were as sharp as ever, and he quickly dodged out of the way, hopping off the tree and onto the ground.
A small part of her hoped that she didn’t just set their paopu tree on fire, but it was drowned out by two months’ worth of held back hurt and anger.

“Kairi, I’m s-”

“How could you leave me behind?!” Kairi screamed, her voice loud as thunder, overpowering, “we promised each other that we would do this together!! That we would go out and search the worlds as a team!! Why would you promise me that if you were just going to leave me?!”

Angry tears filled her eyes, and Riku looked horrified, taking a step towards her with an outstretched hand. But Kairi wasn’t ready for contact, wasn’t ready for closeness, and jerked back with a hiss, and his hand fell back to his side.

“Kai-”

“No, Riku!!! It wasn’t fair!! I couldn’t contact you for two months, I had to sit here like before and worry for days!!” Her hands were starting to shake, and she crossed her arms tight, tight over her chest, trying to hold herself together. “If you still think I’m weak, just say so!! If you wanted me to stay behind because I’m still a liability, you could’ve just told me instead of sneaking off!!”

Riku looked like he’d been punched in the gut, stricken. “Kairi – Kairi, I’m sorry. I don’t think that of you, I swear, I just -”

“I want to find him, too!!” Kairi howled, hurt tearing her up inside, her throat aching from her screams, “I want Sora back just as much as you do, you can’t -!!”

Kairi suddenly stopped short, her breath leaving her in a quiet wheeze, dizziness rushing up on her in a wave. She stumbled back, pressing a hand to her head, and the confused, helpless noise she let out had Riku rushing to her side, placing a cautious hand on her waist.

She wanted to revel in the touch, wanted to push him away and scream some more, but she was overcome, the gap in her memory that had been haunting her for days rapidly closing, filling up with Sora, Sora, Sora.

Sora.

“Sora??” Kairi whimpered, clawing her fingers into Riku’s jacket, and she could almost hear him in her head, from the last time this happened: ‘you don’t remember my name? Jeez, thanks a lot, Kairi!’

She was glad, now, that Riku was holding onto her, because her knees gave out from under her, and Riku quickly wrapped an arm around her waist and hitched her to his chest before she collapsed to the ground.

“Riku?” Kairi gasped, clutching at him, and she didn’t know when she actually started crying but she was sobbing now, big, fat tears falling down her cheeks. “I forgot him?? How did I forget him?? I’ve been wondering what was missing for so long, and I –” Her breath hitched rapidly, and Riku rubbed her arm, trying to keep her from flying into a full panic.
“Did something happen?? Riku?? Did something happen to him, is he -??”

“I don’t know.” Riku admitted quietly, “because I’d forgotten him, too.”

Kairi gaped at him at that confession, speechless; even during the year he was asleep, recovering from Castle Oblivion, Riku never forgot Sora. What changed now?

“…. What happened?”

Whatever strength Riku had left must have been waning, because he sighed, hitching Kairi up to him a little more before making a quick double jump back to their tree, placing Kairi down on the trunk before taking a seat himself with a tired groan.

(The tree, Kairi noted vaguely, was thankfully unsinged.)

“I had traveled very far,” Riku began, “made it a good distance into uncharted territory when a storm hit.” He ran a hand through his hair, expression grim, “it was so strong; it took out all of power in my ship. I thought I was going to be stuck there, stranded in uncharted space, when something knocked my ship off course.”

He shrugged at that, cringing a little, “I can’t…really remember what happened, after that. But the next thing I know, I’m waking up on the ground in some city. No idea where I was, how I got there, or why I was there in the first place. I knew – I knew I was looking for something. Something important. But I had no idea what.”

Kairi listened to Riku’s story in a daze, how he landed in an unfamiliar city of an unfamiliar world and the days he had to spend relying on a strange ally to try and find his ship and get home.

“He was strange,” Riku mused, “but he was the only help I had, at the time. The whole time, I couldn’t remember why I was even there; I missed home, and I missed you. All I knew was that I left to find something important.”

Kairi stiffened a little, and Riku reached out to grab her hand, his eyes so remorseful. “I’m so sorry, Kairi.” He squeezed her hand, “you’re right, I did promise you that we’d find Sora as a team, and then I disrespected that promise by leaving you behind, anyway. I just –”

He sighed deeply, his shoulders slumping a little, and his eyes were a little glassy, “during the war,” he croaked, “seeing that happen to you, what Xheanort did…I couldn’t bear it happening again. I got scared, and it made me stupid. I’m sorry, Kairi; I should’ve trusted you.”

“You should have.” Kairi agreed with a whisper, “Riku, leaving me behind like that hurt me so much. And then, when I didn’t hear from you for almost a month…I didn’t know what to think. I was scared.” Kairi laced their fingers together, forgiveness slowly beginning to cool down the boiling hurt in her heart, “I’ve spent so much time training, just so I can be able to really protect you.”
She squeezed their laced hands, not looking away from Riku so she knew that he took what she said seriously. “I accept your apology, but don’t ever disrespect me like that again. We’re a lot stronger when we’re together.”

Blinking rapidly, Riku lifted their twined hands so he could press a kiss to the back of her hand, before pressing their joined hands against his heart, head bowed. He swayed towards her, shoulders sagging in relief, and Kairi scooted a little closer so he could press his forehead against the curve of her shoulder.

Kairi allowed him a moment of respite before gently jostling him, “you have to finish the story. C’mon.”

“Ah – yeah. Right.” He sat up, tucking some hair behind his ear, and Kairi didn’t call attention to the red rimmed around his eyes.

“So – so I found the ship, eventually, but I still felt – I just felt like I needed to stay. So I did. And I still…. I don’t know where I was. There were monsters, there – Heartless and Nightmares, which was confusing. So I helped clear them out, and eventually –”

He paused, hesitating, his eyes flickering up to Kairi before drifting back down to their joined hands. He looked nervous.

“Eventually, I… I found this new part of the city, way different than the part I was in. Almost like I was in a whole different world, it was so bright and lit up. I got to this intersection and I –” His breath hitched, “I saw him.”

Kairi froze, and it felt like her lungs had seized up in her chest, leaving her gasping for breath.

“You…” her voice was thin, barely a whisper, “you saw him? Really?”

“Really. It all just –” he gestured vaguely around his ear with his free hand, “– came back, when I saw him. I ran to him. I held his hand, just like this.” He lifted their joined hands for a second before placing them back on his lap, eyes shadowed.

“I got to hold him, and see him. Just for a second. And he looked just like he did before he left to find you. He looked fine. But then he just – started to collapse. And before I could catch him, he was just –”

“- gone.” Kairi finished for him, her voice faint, “He was just gone.”

Riku nodded, and he looked so lost, “I had him right there. Right under my hands.” His voice cracked in the middle, and tears silently slipped down his face, “I was holding onto him, and then I wasn’t, and now I don’t know where he’s gone, anymore.”

He bowed his head, covering his face with his free hand, and his shoulders shook as he cried silently.

“I’m sorry, Kairi.” He sobbed, “I said I wouldn’t leave you, and I did. I thought I would find him, to make up for leaving you, but then I couldn’t even hold onto him long enough to bring him home.
I’m sorry.”

Eventually, once Riku cried himself out, Kairi took him home.

His mothers nearly had a fit when they saw him standing at the doorstep, and Kairi ushered everyone in, closing the door before slipping upstairs to Riku’s room, giving them their moment to fuss over Riku, to hug him, to cry.

She sat on the bed and sent a text to Naminè and her father while she waited, letting them know where she was, and then lying down after putting her phone away, curling up on her side.

She stared out the window, and Kairi didn’t know when she fell asleep, but between one breath and the next, she was out, emotionally exhausted and weary from crying.

Kairi dreamed of warm breezes, of lying on the beach and listening to the rush of the waves, the cry of birds. She was lying on the sand, close to the water – she could feel the tide lapping at her bare heels, pushing and pulling away.

She was sandwiched between two people, fingers laced with hers; she knew these hands anywhere, would know them blind, and Kairi gently squeezed her boys’ hands, feeling more at peace than she’s been in a long time. She was grateful to have a sweet dream, for once; to be able to have some respite in sleep and be able to remember when the three of them were together. Kairi sighed, happiness teasing the corners of her mouth, curling into a slight smile, content to drift in this dream as she rested.

Her eyes snapped open when the person on her right squeezed back.

She was greeted to the sunset, the sky bleeding from pink into orange into gold, which confirmed that she was dreaming – it was barely late afternoon when she took Riku home, the sky still a bright, cloudless blue.

Her hand was squeezed again, and Kairi took a deep breath, steeling herself, prepared for the dream to end like it always did, to be pushed into waking any moment as she slowly turned her head.

The dream did not end. The waking did not come.

Sora smiled at her, blue eyes crinkling in the corners in the way that she loved so much, as he ran his thumb gently across her knuckles.

“Hey, Kairi.”
ALRIGHT COOL.

writing this chapter was hard as hell. I was really struggling getting my stride for this whole period of forgetting but we got there eventually. uhhh I'm preeetty sure that any questions will probably definitely get answered in the next chapter.

also, another little fun change, if you noticed terra being the new initiate to the Brown Eyes Gang! and names! new names! kairi's dad's name (keone) means 'sand' or 'the homeland' and sora's new baby sister nalani means 'quiet skies'.

because we love a theme.

whew. I am....a little burnt out from writing over 17k words in less than two days. but I was not kidding when I said I'm getting this demon exorcised from my body 'cause a bitch was writing like she was POSSESSED.

comments and kudos are, once again, super cool. really hoping people out here like this.

see y'all in chapter three!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

hello again!! back at it with chapter 3.

don't have a whole lot to say, except we're getting closer to the halfway point!! how exciting! I'm thinking maybe ten chapters overall, for this whole thing? but we'll see how it goes.

I'll explain my bit with the secret ending and the whole bit I made up for it at the notes at the end, just to clear up any confusion that might be lingering around.

once again - unbeta'd, edited by me to the best of my ability. enjoy!

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Kairi’s heartbeat sounded louder than any drum as it beat rapidly in her ears, and she clutched at Sora’s hand as tight as she could, not looking away from him for a second.

His smile widened, and he let her look her fill of him, content to lay there and stare back just as much. It was just as Riku said – he looked fine, not a bruise or scratch to be found; aside from the tired shadows under his eyes, he looked perfectly healthy.

But he looked healthy the last time she saw him, too.

Kairi didn’t even want to blink, scared that if she closed her eyes for just a second, Sora would disappear, slipping through her fingers like smoke once again.

Honestly, she was petrified to do just about anything to break the stillness, scared stiff that one wrong move would break the spell, but she couldn’t bear to lay there in silence anymore.

“Are you –” her voice cracked, but she pushed on, “are you real? Is this -are you here? Are you really, really here?”

“Yeah, Kairi. It’s me. I’m here.”

Kairi was really tearing up now, big fat droplets clinging to her eyelashes, but she stubbornly kept them at bay, screwing her face up in a way that made Sora laugh quietly. “Aw, Kairi, don’t cry!! It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” She said shortly, still trying not to cry, “If this is some kind of weird dream, or a trick, I’ll – I don’t know what I’ll –” Cautiously, she turned to Riku, who was still lying on her left, fast asleep, and began to shake his hand, still keeping up her tight grip on Sora to make sure he didn’t slip away from them.
“Riku. Riku, wake up, Sora’s here!! Riku!!”

But he stayed silent, slowly breathing in and out in time with the waves.

“He’s not asleep yet.”

“What?” She turned back to Sora, and a part of her crumpled in relief that he was still there, not really believing in the grip they had on each other.

“He’s not sleeping, so I can’t connect to him yet. It’s really weird to explain but-” he shrugged, “-I just…. kinda felt that you were sleeping. And I reached out to you, and I found you.”

“Found m -how did you – Sora!!” Kairi had so much she wanted to say she didn’t even know where to start, all the words bubbling up and tangling together, sticking behind her teeth as she struggled to find her voice.

Part of her wants to howl in relief, to sob until she became nothing but little drops and melted into the sea. Another part of her wants to scream and shake Sora for his sacrifice, for rushing ahead so recklessly like always and leaving them behind. She never wanted to let go of his hand, wanted to pull him up and away from this bubble and bring him home, waking up sandwiched between him and Riku like before.

She tried to find some semblance of calm, taking a big, slow breath through her nose. “Sora,” she finally said, “where are you? Do you know? What – what happened to you? Do you -?”

Kairi had more questions, hundreds more, but she held back, biting her tongue as Sora’s brow wrinkled in thought. “I…. I don’t know where I am. I’m still…figuring it out, I guess. But, hmm… well.”

He smiled at her, and it was horribly sad. “I shouldn’t have used the Power of Waking the way I did,” he admitted, “bringing everyone back. Bringing you back. I abused the power, so…I paid for it.”

“What do you mean.” Kairi’s lips barely moved, but she pushed the words out, “Sora? What do you mean?”

Sora was silent for a while, which felt like enough of an answer on its own. “After I…. brought you home…I just…” He shrugged, sand tumbling into the hood of his jacket at the movement, “it took me a long time, finding you. Bringing you back. With that on top of what happened during the war…my heart just kinda…gave out, I guess.”

At the mention of his rescue of her, Kairi was back there, on that tree, face wet with tears as Sora vanished under the light of the setting sun, and she felt sick.

“It wasn’t worth it,” she said in a thin whisper, “I wasn’t worth it. Sora, you –”

“Kairi.” He squeezed her hand, “I would do it again in a heartbeat. I’d do it a million times, if it meant that you were safe.”

His casual disregard for his person made Kairi grit her teeth, but she put it aside for now, “it doesn’t explain any of this. It doesn’t explain how you’re here. Sora, how? I –”
She thought back to those weeks of forgetting, of feeling like something was missing, and she felt horrible. “I forgot you.” Kairi whispered, “everyone did. How did I do that? How did that happen?”

At that, Sora cringed, apologetic, “aww, Kairi, I’m sorry. That was my fault. Where I ended up, I… I needed an entry fee.”

Blinking, Kairi stared blankly at him, not really understanding what that has to do with anything. “Entry fee? Sora, what-?”

“Oh.” His thumb brushed across her knuckles again, and he glanced over their surroundings, “you’re about to leave.”

He looked a little lonely, as he said that, and Kairi looked around them in a panic, noting how everything began to blur, colors blending together like paint dripped in water.

“No,” Kairi whispered, feeling drowsy, “no, no, no, Sora-”

“I’ll be right here,” he promised, and Kairi’s panic increased when she felt his hand beginning to slip away, her eyes sliding closed no matter how hard she tried to keep them open, “I’ll tell you everything soon, I promise.”

“No-”

-Kairi?”

She blearily came to from the soft jostling of the mattress as Riku sat on the bed, leaning over her with a concerned look. “Are you okay? You were muttering in your sleep a lot.”

Kairi rolled onto her back to face him, and Riku inhaled sharply as he took in the damp tear tracks on her face. “Kairi…what happened? What’s wrong?”

He’d changed while she was sleeping, dressed more comfortably for bed, and some of the haggard exhaustion was gone from around his eyes. He reached out and gently cupped her cheek in his hand, wiping away the remaining tear stains with his thumb. “Do you…wanna talk about it?”

Blinking slowly, Kairi considered him, still trying to wake up; she felt like she could fall back asleep any minute. “…in a minute.” She finally said, “time ‘sit?”

“Pretty late; you were asleep for a long time.” As Riku spoke, she noticed how dark the room had gotten, the afternoon sunshine replaced with the bruise blue shadows of dusk. “Do you want me to take you home? It’s not fully dark yet.”

“No…it’s fine. I told dad and Naminè where I’ve gone, they’ll understand. C’mere.” She scooted away, moving closer to the window, and held her arms out in a silent request. Riku folded into her arms gratefully, pressing one hand between her shoulder blades and another at the small of her back as Kairi wrapped her legs around one of his, twining them as close as she possibly could. He was warm, and smelled like clean laundry and soap, and Kairi ran a hand through his hair to make
sure it wasn’t too wet.

“I’m still mad at you,” she reminded him sternly, “so you have two months’ worth of cuddling to do so I won’t be mad at you anymore.”

Riku sighed in a faux-exasperated manner, “two months of cuddling…. if that’s the burden I must bear, so be it.”

Kairi laughed, a quiet exhale, and the room fell silent, Riku’s hand rubbing absent circles at the small of her back almost sending her back to sleep. She forced herself to stay awake, though – she needed to tell him about her dream.

“How are your parents doing, now? Did you talk to them?”

“Yeah.” Riku sighed, “I really upset them, leaving the way I did. I…I want to tell them the truth, one day. I want to tell them everything, but –”

“Every time I think about telling everything to my dad, I hear Donald in my ear, screeching about the world order.”

He laughed, “exactly that. But…I don’t like keeping anything from them. And how can I explain being off world so much? I can’t worry them like this again.”

Riku looked a little tired, at the thought of having to continue lying to his mothers, but he shook it off, focusing on her. “But enough about me, really -what did I miss, while I was gone? Did anything happen?”

“Mmm…not much.” Kairi pressed even closer, smooshing her cheek against Riku’s collarbone, “Jun had the baby, last week.”

“What?! I missed that?!” She didn’t need to see his face to know that Riku was distraught, and she hummed, part confirmation, part sympathy. “Oh god, I’ll need to visit them soon. I need to bring a gift. How did it -?”

“It went…great. They named her Nalani.”

“That’s a good name.”

“Mmhm. It was…a little sad, too. Jun felt like something was missing the whole time.”

“Oh.” Riku stiffened a little at that, and Kairi squeezed him, trying to get him to relax; she can’t get comfortable when her pillow is a rock. “It’ll be fine. You can stop by and see them tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Silence, again, and Kairi felt she could fall asleep any second, to Riku’s warmth and smell and the soft, quiet beat of his heart.

“Riku,” she finally mumbled, “I had a dream.”
“Hm?” He sounded as close to sleep as she was, and she loathed to snap him out of it.

“About Sora. He was there.”

“What??” He sounded more awake now, at the mention of that, and when he tried to pull back to stare at Kairi, she just held on to him, keeping him close. “Kairi, seriously, what -?”

“I don’t know! I didn’t – he didn’t get to tell me everything, but I –”

Kairi felt the familiar sting of tears behind her eyes and she ground her teeth, so damn tired of crying. “It wasn’t a trick, or a joke.” She whispered tightly, “it was him. Really him.”

She finally pulled away enough to look up at Riku, and he was stricken, afraid to believe her, but the hope making his eyes glitter in a way she hasn’t seen in a long time.

“He said – he told me he shouldn’t have used the Power of Waking, the way he did. That there was a price, but he’d do it again a million times if it meant we were safe.”

Riku laughed, incredulous, “That sounds like him.” His voice was shaking. “That sounds like our reckless Sora. Did he…was he able to tell you where he was?”

When Kairi shook her head, his face fell a little in disappointment. “All he was able to tell me was that…that all of us forgetting him – it was an entry fee?”

“Entry fee?” His brow wrinkled in confusion at that, “to what??”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Sometime while they were talking, Riku had dipped his hand under the hem of her shirt, thumb absently running along the skin of her back, and Kairi relaxed further into the touch. She didn’t even tense up anymore, like she used to, when his thumb occasionally brushed against the edge of the ugly, jagged scar that stretched across her back – in the earlier months, she couldn’t bear anyone looking at the scar, much less touch it.

She was starting to doze off again when Riku spoke up, “Kairi.”

“Mm?”

“Do you think…” his voice was hesitant, a little shaky with hope, “do you think…I’ll get to see him, too?”

“Riku, do you even have to ask?” She tightened her arms around him, “of course you will. I don’t doubt that at all.”

Kairi was finally able to drift off after that, and she made sure to keep Riku close, hoping that if she sank back into her dreams to Sora, her grip was strong enough to bring Riku with her.

-o-

Sora didn’t come to them, that night. Or the next.
Instead of dreaming of home, of Sora, waiting for them, Kairi’s dreams were nonsensical, jumbled. By the fourth night of nothing but more senseless, tangled up dreams, Kairi was beginning to feel discouraged, wondering if that flash of contact with Sora was just a fluke. That maybe it really was just a dream, after all.

She didn’t want to spend another day moping and worrying, so instead of lying in bed feeling sad, like she wanted to, she invited Roxas and Xion to the islands.

Kairi hadn’t seen them in a while, distracted by Nalani’s birth and Riku’s return, so when she saw them waiting for her at the beach, Xion already beginning to hunt for shells while Roxas slathered sunscreen on his face, Kairi’s mood perked up considerably.

“Roxas! Xion!” She skipped towards them with a smile and threw herself at Roxas, hugging him tightly, before bouncing back and scooping Xion up in greeting, spinning around until she laughed. “Hi!! It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s only been what, a week? Two?” Roxas asked, still dazed by the tight hug. “Still, it’s good to see you too, Kairi. You feeling any better?”

“Yes! Sort of!” Kairi beamed, “Roxas, I remembered. I finally remembered. I think everyone did, but I haven’t fully checked around yet. Did you?”

“I…. yeah.” It was slow, but the small smile Roxas gave her was the best thing she’d ever seen. “I did. A few days ago.”

“And me!” Xion gave Kairi a squeeze, grinning, “I told you everything would turn out alright.”

Relief made Kairi feel lighter than air, and even though the lack of contact from Sora still weighed on her, she felt better than she’s been in days. “Yeah, you were right. Thanks, Xion. But that’s not why I invited you here!”

She clasped her hands together, looking between the two of them, “it’s been a while since we hung out for fun and didn’t do any training or anything, so I figured we’d spend the day here! I haven’t really been able to show you around yet. We can spend some time at the beach, too. And you can meet my dad! It’ll be fun!”

“I would like that. The first time I came to the islands….it wasn’t for very happy reasons. So, I’d like to see it on my own terms. Oh, and we’d get to see Naminè!!” Xion turned to Roxas with wide eyes, as if Roxas would ever say no to her about seeing Naminè. Really, Kairi mused, they were so obvious.

Roxas made a face at Xion’s pleading eyes, “put the eyes away, you know I like seeing Naminè as much as you do. Alright then, Kairi.” He swept a hand out, “lead the way.”

It was nice, showing the two of them around the islands, pointing out the shops and food stands, and all the stories hidden in the nooks and crannies of her home. Eventually they stopped for ice cream, because once Xion and Roxas saw the small ice cream boutique they wouldn’t leave without having their daily portion.

They were disgruntled over the fact that the store was lacking sea salt flavor, but they eventually settled for strawberry and mango, respectively.
Eventually they went back to the beaches, and settled down to finish off their ice creams, watching other people play in the surf and boats heading further out to fish.

“So, did you ever get in touch with Riku?” Xion asked, quickly licking up a melting trail of ice cream before it reached her hand.

“Ah…yeah, he…he came back, recently.”

Roxas grinned widely at that admission, “oh really. Is he in trouble?”

“So much trouble. Yelled at him and everything.” Kairi twiddled her fingers together, slightly ashamed, “I may have…. kind of, y’know…. threw a fireball at him.”

“Kairi.”

“Without your Keyblade?” Kairi cringed, and Roxas whistled, “wow, that’s impressive.”

“I was really mad, okay!?” She burst, “I tried really hard to not just blow up at him right away, but it had been two months and I was really hurt ’cause he promised me we’d go find Sora and bring him back together!!! And then I had those days where I was freaked out from forgetting Sora and just knowing it was something super important having no idea what it was and I- and I just -!”

She puffed her cheeks out, frustrated. “I’m just glad I didn’t set the paopu tree on fire, I guess,” she grumbled, folding her arms over her knees as Xion and Roxas snickered at her. “Sure, laugh at my pain,” Kairi muttered, “I can make fire happen with just my brain, apparently, so see what happens.”

“It was all very dramatic,” Xion said as Roxas popped the last of his ice cream cone in his mouth, “but fair. You had every right to be upset. Where’s Riku now, anyway?”

“Probably with Sora’s parents. His mom had the baby last week, and Riku missed it, so he’s visiting a lot to make up for it.”

“Baby? There’s a baby?? What??”

“Yes! Nalani is wonderful, she’s only a couple weeks old and she’s so fat and cute, she’s so sweet. Do you guys want to see her?”

They both looked so torn, which made Kairi stifle a laugh as she waited them out for their response. “Maybe…. later today??” Xion asked hesitantly, “After we see your dad? And Naminè?”

Roxas still looked nervous at the thought of finally meeting Sora’s parents, but nodded in agreement. “We should definitely see Naminè first. And then…I guess…we can meet Sora’s family.”

He looked so anxious, and Kairi tried to soothe the worry away with a smile, pushing herself to her feet and brushing away the sand clinging to her shorts. “Roxas, don’t worry about it so much. You’re my friends, they’ll love you. They’re very nice, I promise.”

She could probably spout reassurances until she was blue in the face, but Roxas probably still wouldn’t believe her, just as hardheaded as Sora.

Introducing them to her dad and bringing them to Naminè helped abate his nerves, for the moment,
he and Xion lighting up at Naminè’s surprised face when Kairi brought them into the living room, eye glittering in happiness as she threw herself at the two of them for a group hug.

They didn’t make it to see Sora’s parents, in the end, but Kairi wasn’t discouraged; there would be a hundred more chances for them to meet. She would get them to connect eventually, she knew it.

And if she couldn’t, then maybe, hopefully sooner than later, Sora would be there to connect them instead.

-o-

Kairi slept, and dreamed, and this time it felt different.

It wasn’t the nonsensical mess it’s been for the past few days, the feeling of dreams and nightmares blurring together; this time, it felt crisp, concrete. She could feel the warm brush of winds against her cheeks, sharp with the tang of salt water, and hear the tide pulling back and forth across the sand. Kairi opened her eyes to impossibly blue sky and wondered for a moment if she actually retired for bed, or if she’d just fallen asleep on the beach after training.

“Kairi.”

A shadow crossed her vision, and Kairi blinked until the shadow focused into Riku, looking down at her with wide eyes.

“Sorry,” she yawned, “did I fall asleep? We’re at the play island, were we training? I’ll be up soon, just give me a minute —”

“Kairi, no.” Riku looked shaken, eyes occasionally darting up to look around the beach “we went to bed, remember? You sent me your usual goodnight text, and I went to sleep, and then I just —”

Now Kairi was definitely awake, and she shot up, looking around the play island with wide eyes. “No way,” she whispered, unable to believe it, “no w -if this is all a dream, then that -that means that —”

“You’re here!”

Kairi shakily stood up as Riku’s head snapped around, desperately seeking out the source of the voice.

Over on the paopu tree – their paopu tree -was Sora, sitting at his usual spot. He smiled, and even from a distance, the brightness of it rivaled the sun, “I finally got through to you again!”

The two of them were sprinting to the tree before they could even think about it.

Kairi reached him first, and with a hearty double jump – “Wow, Kairi! When did you learn to do that?” – she landed on the paopu trunk and had Sora wrapped up in her arms, holding him as tight as she could as she buried her face into his chest. He was so warm, from the sun, and though his heartbeat was a little faint, a terrifying weak flutter against her cheek, he was there, and Kairi really couldn’t blame herself for crying, this time.
Sora had wrapped his arms around her waist, clutching her to him just as tightly, but began to rub her back when he heard her sniffle softly.

“Sora?” Riku had hopped onto the tree next to them, getting as close as he could, and Kairi turned her head a little to look at him, splotchy and teary eyed as he stared at Sora like he was seeing a ghost. “Is it really you? You’re really here??”

His voice was starting to do that squeaky thing it’s always done since they were kids, every time Riku was close to tears but trying to hold it in. Sora’s smile completely decimated any self-control that he had, and Riku started to cry as Sora reassured him, “yes, it’s me. It’s really me, Riku! I’m here.”

Seeing Riku cry just made Kairi start to cry all over again, and Sora went back to rubbing her back as he reached out and cupped Riku’s face in his hand, futilely trying to wipe away all the tears.

“Kairi, don’t cry! Riku, you too, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

“Stop it!! It’s not okay!!” Kairi bawled, weakly thumping at Sora’s chest, “nothing about this is okay!!”

“Sora,” Riku wept, reaching up to press the hand he’d pressed to his cheek close, “where are you?? What happened?? I looked everywhere for you, and then I found you, but you slipped away again, and I –”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He smiled at them, and he looked so tired, dark circles smudging his eyes, his brown skin shaded with a slight pallor, all of the warm glow taken out. “I’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

“Yes, you do!” Kairi said furiously, “what happened?! What did you mean, by an ‘entry fee’ the last time? Have you figured out where you are now? We want to bring you home, Sora.”

He was quiet, but only for a moment, looking between the two of them, considering.

“I really did mean it, when I said that using the Power of Waking so much just…made my heart give out.” He started, “for a while, I was just…drifting. I don’t really know where I was. But eventually I woke up in this place…in a city. Shibuya. I was told that – that this would be my second chance.”

His eyes drifted downward, staring at his lap, before focusing back on them after a gentle shake from Kairi. “I had to take part in a game.” He continued, “if I won, I would be brought back. If I lost, then, well…I’d be gone. For good. To be part of the game, I had to - I had to give an entry fee.”

Sora smiled tiredly at them, “my friends, the connections I have with all the people I love – they’re what make me strong. Without them, I don’t really think I’m much of anything. So these bonds, these feelings I have for you – they were my fee to get in.”

Kairi could have all the time in the world and she still wouldn’t be able to cover how ridiculous she found that statement – Sora was one of the strongest people she ever knew, with or without his
bonds. But she put it aside for now, “but you won, right? You beat the game, obviously, or you
wouldn’t be here, right?”

“If you did beat the game,” Riku broke in, “if you got your ‘second chance’, then why are we
seeing you like this?”

“Ah, well.” Sora looked unsure, “I don’t really know? I – I was far away - really far away. I had no
idea how I was going to fully come back, after beating the game. But then – I had this wild card.”

“What?”

“A wild card! I got it from Luxord, during the war. He said – he said it might help, someday.
Could turn the tables, for me.” Sora shrugged, “in a way, it did. It got me out. It – it’s helped me
get a little closer to you all, maybe. I…”

He sighed, and he looked so tired, “it’s taking a lot out of me, reaching out to you like this. I didn’t
think I’d be able to do it again, after last time. I just feel…” Sora frowned, pondering, “I feel
shattered.” He finally said, “like I’m not…fully there. Like there’s pieces missing.”

He looked at Kairi, and then turned to Riku, who was still clutching his hand to his face. Sora ran a
thumb across Riku’s cheekbone, softly, “I’m so tired.” He sighed, “it feels like – it kinda feels like
during the exam, you know? Does that make any sense?”

Riku froze up, and Kairi could practically see the gears begin to turn in his head as he thought, the
possibility of having an idea where Sora was and being able to reach him beginning to make her
heart race.

“Yeah.” Riku said, his voice hoarse, “that makes sense. Don’t worry, Sora. I think – I think I know
where you are.”

“You do?” He perked up a little at that, “that’s good. I knew I could count on you two.”

“Me? I didn’t even really do anything.” Kairi couldn’t help the sliver of bitterness that crept into
her voice, and Sora’s eyebrows crept up in surprise.

“Kairi, of course you did! How else was I able to find you?” He smiled, “no matter where I’m at, I
can recognize your light anywhere.”

Kairi’s cheeks went splotchy with her embarrassment, and she shoved her face back into Sora’s
chest as he laughed. “Kairi, we’re gonna have to make a visit to Twilight Town,” Riku said, “I need
to talk with Master Yen Sid. I think – I have an idea, but I need to ask him to be sure. We’re going
to come get you.”

Riku stressed this, pulling Sora’s hand away from his cheek to lace their fingers together. “Okay,
Sora? We’re going to bring you home, I swear it.”

“Yeah.” Sora agreed, so readily placing his faith in them that it made Kairi feel a little shaky, “I
know you will.” His expression quickly changed as he bit his lip, looking a little scared, “just, uh –
don’t leave me just yet, okay? I –” his voice cracked a little, and he cleared his throat, “I really,
really miss you two.”
He pulled the two of them closer, which should’ve been impossible since Kairi was practically in his lap, and he was pressed against Riku from shoulder to hip.

“Sora, of course.” Kairi wound her arms around his neck, just as Riku raised their joined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of Sora’s hand. “Nothing could pull us away from you right now. We’re not going anywhere.”

Pressed as close as they were, the two of them felt Sora relax into them, and Kairi was perfectly fine with staying here all night, the three of them wrapped up together in their own peaceful bubble.

The answers could wait until the morning.

-o-

As promised, Riku packed the two of them up in his gummi ship and flew to Twilight Town.

From there, they quickly boarded onto the tram that would take them to the Mysterious Tower, the crooked spires standing tall against the backdrop of stars. When they took the many stairs to the top of the tower, Riku knocked on the thick wood of the door and waited until they heard a deep voice granting them entry.

Riku held the door open for Kairi, letting her enter the room first, and the two of them moved to stand before the former Master and give him a respectful bow in greeting.

“Children, you know a greeting like that isn’t necessary.” Yen Sid spoke, sharp eyes warm with amusement, “to what do I owe this visit?”

His tone was full of inquiry, but his eyes told them that he already knew the reason for their coming; Kairi wonders to herself if he found out through the stars.

“We’ve been searching for Sora,” Riku started, “as I’m sure you already knew. It’s been almost a year, but our searching has come up with nothing.”

“As I suspected.” Yen Sid nodded slowly, “the Power of Waking was not something to be handled so casually, and Sora had to pay the price, for causing such a disturbance to the balance. But something recently must have changed, for you to come to me so suddenly.”

Kairi felt irritation roil in her gut at his words, but she held it back, setting her jaw against a scathing remark hiding behind her teeth. Riku nodded shortly, “yes. He’s connected to us, in dreams – both of us. He told us what happened to him, after the war, and I think I have an idea of where he is.”

He inhaled slowly, drawing himself up, waiting for a response from Yen Sid -but Kairi was not as patient to wait for permission to speak like Riku was.

“With what Sora told us, Riku thinks - we think - that Sora ended up in the Sleeping Worlds.” Kairi blurted out, “we think – we think his heart is there, scattered, and – and we want to go, and put the pieces together again. To bring him back.”
She laced her shaking hands behind her back, feeling slightly guilty for speaking out of turn as Yen Sid’s piercing eyes turned to her. Kairi would not back down, would not falter, and she stood tall as Yen Sid quietly considered her words.

“You are sure of this?” Yen Sid finally asked, looking between the two of them.

“I am.” Riku said confidently, “the Sleeping Worlds, and the word beyond that…they’re closely entwined. It’s possible – after Sora received his ‘second chance’, he ended up there.”

Yen Sid closed his eyes, considering, and Kairi felt herself start to sweat from nerves.

“Then, Riku, you know what you must do,” the retired Master finally said, opening his eyes. “I believe it would be a good time for an exam.”

Riku froze, shoulders stiffening as he stared at Yen Sid with wide eyes. “Are you –” his voice came out in a faint whisper, “Master…are you sure?”

“I am.” As Yen Sid closed his eyes, his tone was final, and Kairi felt a wave of anticipation rise up in her- of foreboding. “I have consulted with the stars, and I feel that the realm of light is not yet finished with you Keyblade wielders – and so, you need to be ready.”

“Riku?” Kairi turned to him, “what’s going on? Are we going to be able to go get him?”

He looked over at her, his eyes still impossibly wide, and Kairi felt the bottom of her stomach drop out at what he told her.

“Kairi – he wants you to take the Mark of Mastery.”

Chapter End Notes

HAHA I SURE AM DOING THIS, I SURE THE FUCK AM

if sora and riku can take the exam after like....almost two years of being keyblade wielders, then kairi can too, who gives a fuck. it'll be fun!!! once I....finish planning everything lmao

I probably will pause in posting after putting up chapter 4 to fully get the Mark of Mastery arc together, so just be patient with me while I sort that out!

but yes! basically, in my using of the secret ending: since it shows sora in shibuya, he's probably going to take part in the reaper's game. since in the game he p much fell apart once all his friends were taken, saying without them he was nothing, I decided to make that his entry fee into the game. in giving up his connections to his loved ones, everyone forgot him a la COM.

when he won the game, the connections were restored, and the wildcard luxord gave
him helped sora move a little further from what I basically see as the realm of death and more into the realm of sleep/dreams. but he didn't make it there in one piece. I hope that makes sense. I explained it all to my brother and he was like 'it sounds like kingdom hearts' which is the highest compliment I've gotten, ever, in my entire life.

okay cool. I'm tired! I'm going to go have a glass of wine now, decompress and stuff.

comments and kudos are nice, please validate me, etc. see y'all soon, hopefully!
Yen Sid gave them a month to prepare.

Before they departed, Kairi requested the help of the good fairies for an upgraded outfit. “It doesn’t have to be completely different,” she reassured, “I just – maybe something with pants underneath? And some gloves? Nothing super drastic.”

The outfit would be updated by the time she had to take her exam, and with that promise in hand, Kairi was good to go.

Riku, on the other hand, wasn’t doing so hot.

When Kairi left the tower, she found Riku waiting for her outside, sitting on the steps, leg jiggling in his nerves as he stared down at his hands.

Yen Sid had declared that it would not be up to him to prepare the exam; this time, the duties have fallen to Riku and Aqua, as the new Masters. Riku, who was still stunned at the decision to test Kairi with the Mark of Mastery, now paled at the realization that he would have to oversee the exam.

“Hey.” Kairi announced her presence with a gentle touch to the back of his neck, sliding her hand to his shoulder as she sat near him on the steps. “Are you ready to go?”

“Mm.” Riku tangled his fingers together, and Kairi wondered if he even heard what she said; his leg was still bouncing, a loud display of his anxiety. Sighing, Kairi leaned into him, pressing her cheek against his tense shoulder as she waited him out.

Riku always has that moment of doubt, that hesitation over whether he has even earned all this, if
he’s worthy enough to handle the responsibilities given to him. It’s fine, though, Kairi thinks, as she breaks the tight grip Riku had on his hands to lace their fingers together; it’s okay to feel unsteady, for a little while. Kairi has enough faith for both of them.

When Yen Sid placed the responsibility of overseeing the exam on Riku, she knew that she would be in one of the safest hands of all the worlds.

Eventually, Riku slowly crept out of his own head, and he sighed, muscles slowly relaxing as he pressed his cheek atop Kairi’s head.

“Welcome back.” She smiled, closing her eyes, “still nervous?”

“I should be asking you that.”

“Well, I mean,” she shrugged, “of course I’m nervous! This is like – like our final exams in school, before we graduated, times a million.”

Kairi bit her lip, the jitters she tried to keep at bay rising up in her belly, “I’m afraid to fail this.” She admitted, her voice a thin whisper, “of course I am. Not at the idea of becoming a Master – though that would be amazing – but because…if I fail…I wouldn’t be able to bring Sora home.”

“Kairi…” Riku let go of her hand to slip an arm around her waist, giving her a squeeze, “if anyone can bring Sora back to us, it’ll be you.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” Riku agreed firmly, “I just wish I could go with you.”

“You are going to be with me.” Kairi placed a hand over her heart, giving him a sweet smile, “you’ll be right here. As nervous as I am about failing, I’m not scared of the exam itself – with you watching over everything, I’ll be safe the entire time.”

A deep blush spread across Riku’s face, and he groaned loudly, gently shoving Kairi with his hip, “you’re so cheesy. Sora really rubbed off on you; usually it’s just him that can reach that level of corny.”

Batting her eyelashes, Kairi leaned further into Riku’s arm and grinned like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, heart warming with victory once he let out a quiet laugh. After that moment of low laughter, Riku’s amused smile turned apologetic, and he leaned in until his nose gently brushed against hers.

“Sorry, Kairi,” he murmured, “I need to go to the Land of Departure. I’ll probably be gone for a while.”

“Mm. I had a feeling; you’ve got to tell Aqua and prepare. Thank you for telling me, though.”

“Do you want me to take you home?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go back to Twilight Town, I can ask Roxas or Lea to take me home.”

Riku sighed quietly as he nudged his forehead against hers, closing his eyes, “I feel like I just got back. I don’t want to leave.”

“Just call when you can. And send me messages.” Kairi smiled apologetically, “I’ll answer this
time, I promise.”

“No, I upset you, then; I understand why you wouldn’t want to talk to me.”

“Understanding it doesn’t suddenly make it okay. I’ll pick up this time, no matter what.”

Riku gave her the smile that she loved so much, the one that made his nose wrinkle and always made her want to kiss him, every single time. That urge was one Kairi always gave into, happily, and she turned her head to press the softest kiss to the corner of his mouth. Pulling back, Kairi took in the sweet, shy look on Riku’s face with a pleased smile before slipping out of his loosened grip, hopping to her feet.

“Okay, Riku, let’s go! We have a lot of work to do.” She held a hand out for him to help pull him to his feet, “I’ll walk you to the gummi ship and see you off.”

Linking their pinkies together, Kairi swung their hands together as they headed towards the tram that would take them back to Twilight Town, Riku still looking a little shy as he let her lead the way.

“I’ll call every day,” Riku promised once they were seated on the tram, watching the scenery pass them in a blur of colors, “and I’ll make sure nothing happens during your exam, so it won’t end up like ours.”

Kairi looked down at their hands, pinkies still hooked together, and leaned against Riku with a sigh as she turned back to the window, “I know you will, Riku. I’ll be ready.”

The rest of the ride was passed in peaceful silence, and when they got to the gummi ship, Kairi made sure to give Riku a proper kiss goodbye before seeing him off.

-o-

For the next month, Kairi was determined to spend as much time as she could preparing.

She couldn’t go to the Land of Departure to work on her magic, seeing that Aqua was busy preparing the exam with Riku, but she made do on her own, working to improve her elemental spells and sharpening up some of the light spells Roxas had been teaching her in the past months.

Kairi never wanted for a sparring partner, with Roxas, Xion, and Lea readily available to practice with her and make sure that no matter how the exam went, she was at her best.

Riku kept his promise and made sure to send her a message almost every day, and every night they spent at least an hour in a video call on the gummiphone. He looked tired, some days, but Kairi wasn’t worried; she trusted in Aqua and Terra, believed that they would make sure Riku didn’t run himself ragged.

When she wasn’t practicing and preparing, Kairi worried.

She wasn’t lying to Riku when she told him that she was nervous; the closer the day of the exam
came, the more anxious she felt. Her worries followed her to her dreams, some nights, the fear that
she could comb the entirety of the Sleeping Worlds but would never be able to find Sora. The
thought of her returning empty handed, coming home to a hollow victory and labeled a Master
while Sora remained lost, made her sick with dread.

Sora hadn’t come to her in dreams, since the last time, and when Kairi remembered how washed
out he looked, the dull pallor in his skin and the dark shadows under his eyes, she feared that if he
continued to try so hard to reach out to them, he would slip away from them again forever. She
couldn’t bear that; not when they were so close to having him home again.

When her anxieties made her unable to sleep, Kairi snuck out to the play islands to practice,
summoning her Keyblade and honing her form with katas until she felt ready to collapse to the
sand.

She would make herself rise above these worries, push herself more and more until the fear was
buried under her hard work; she couldn’t let herself have any room for doubt, because doubting
wouldn’t bring Sora back to them.

So she worried and studied and trained, and if she spent a few days training more than she should,
or not sleeping as much as she ought to, then that was for her to deal with.

Or it would have been, if she didn’t have a sister that saw too much.

“Kairi, let’s go to the beach; I’d like to go swimming today.”

“Ah, sorry, I can’t; I’ve got to go train some more, Roxas –”

“Isn’t coming over.” Naminè tilted her head to the side with a smile, “I told him you were
overworking yourself, and that he and Xion can stay there unless it’s to go swimming with us.”

Kairi turned away from the front door of their home, annoyance beginning to churn in her gut,
“Naminè, you can’t –”

But she wouldn’t budge, standing firm in the hall with her arms crossed, “I can, and I will.” Her
tone was sharp, “Kairi, do you really think I didn’t notice how you’ve been going out to practice
for half the night? You’re going to run yourself into the ground at this rate.”

Kairi ground her teeth, irritated at how Naminè was right, and she
knew that, but – “I have
to practice! The exam is in two weeks, I can’t –”

“Do you think you’re going to be able to bring Sora home if you push yourself to exhaustion?!”
Naminè demanded, cutting Kairi off. She stiffened at the mention of Sora, but Naminè wouldn’t be
moved, her eyes hard, “you need to treat yourself kindly. You can’t save him if you keep going on
like this; you need to do this at your best.”

Kairi’s shoulders sagged, and she slumped against the door with a gusty sigh, eyes drifting to the
floor. “…You’re right.” She agreed, and god did she hate admitting it, “I…sorry, Naminè. Okay.
We can go swimming.”
Naminè’s posture softened slightly, but she didn’t completely relax until they changed and left the house, Kairi flopping back onto their large beach towel after putting on sunscreen.

Kairi didn’t say anything for a while, still irritated at the interruption in her training, but she knew Naminè would wait her out. She was pulling her sketchbook out of her bag, hat flopping lazily in the breeze as she thumbed open her pack of pencils; she looked at ease, but Kairi could see that her eyes were still a little hard, giving her a few sharp glances every now and then.

She never got to see what Naminè decided to draw; between what felt like one breath and the next, Kairi drifted to sleep, the days of overwork finally catching up to her.

When she woke up, it was late afternoon, and she was alone. When she sat up, she saw Naminè’s hat and cover-up, neatly folded on top of her bag, and when she looked out to sea, she saw Naminè’s pale hair bobbing among the waves.

Wobbling to her feet, Kairi stretched out her sore muscles, yawning widely, and could admit to herself that now, she felt better than she’d felt in days.

She could tell Naminè did her best to make sure she didn’t burn while she was passed out, but she reapplied some sunscreen anyways before she made her way down the shore and waded into the surf. Naminè blinked at her when Kairi swam up to her, eyes glittering like topaz in the bright sun, and waited for her to speak, quietly treading water.

“I’m sorry,” Kairi finally said, reaching out and grabbing Naminè’s hand. “You were right – I was overworking myself. I shouldn’t have gotten upset at you.”

They hopped over the crest of a wave, letting it carry them a little closer to shore, and Kairi pulled them so that they were floating on their backs like all those months ago, staring at the sky.

“I know you’re worried, Kairi,” Naminè said softly, “but running yourself ragged isn’t going to help. You’ve been working really hard, the past year. You’re going to bring him home.”

“But what if I don’t?” Kairi finally voiced her fears, let them get carried away by the wind, “what if – what if I search all over, but I can’t find him? He – I’ve been dreaming of him, you know? He’s been reaching out to me, and what if – trying to do that, what if he – he faded away again, to somewhere I can never get to?”

Her lip trembled a little, “if the Sleeping Worlds are like the worlds in the realm of light…there’s so many. Hundreds upon hundreds of worlds there, waiting. What if I can’t do it?”

Naminè didn’t say anything for a while, but Kairi knew it was because she was thinking, so she gave her a moment, gnawing on her lower lip slightly in nerves.

“…maybe you don’t have to take the exam alone?”

“Huh?”

Naminè pulled until they sunk back into the water, treading against the waves as Kairi looked at her with wide eyes, blinking rapidly. “Sora and Riku took the Mark of Mastery together,” Naminè explained, “so who says you can’t take it with someone, too?”
“But…who could come with me?”

She shrugged, “I can’t help you there. Lea, maybe? I know you two trained together for a while, before the war. But that’s for you to decide, Kairi; I can’t offer a lot of options.”

Kairi frowned, beginning to mentally sort through her options, but Naminè quickly stopped her by pulling them back to shore. “You can think about it later.” She stressed, letting go of Kairi’s hand to wring seawater out of her dripping hair as they stepped onto the sand, “come on; I made us some food, before we left. And you probably need something to drink, anyway.”

They sat on the large towel, and air dried while Naminè pulled sandwiches and cut fruit out of her bag, the duo passing a bottle of juice between them as they ate. After their quick lunch, Naminè walked a short distance away to pick around for shells while Kairi stayed on the towel, chin perched on her knees as she watched Naminè brush sand away from a shell with a smile.

“You sure are grabbing a lot of shells lately, Naminè.” Kairi raised her voice to make sure it carried over to her, “I know you don’t like to collect shells that much – who are they for, huh?”

Naminè strode back to their towel and resolutely placed the shell with the small collection she already gathered while Kairi was sleeping, very much not looking at Kairi as her cheeks went rosy in a way that had nothing to do with the sun.

Kairi couldn’t resist poking a little more, “Xion and Roxas are always so excited to come see you - and they didn’t come by at all, today! You’ve really got them wrapped around your finger, huh?”

Now Naminè couldn’t hide her smile, and it was so mischievous and like her own teasing grins that no one could ever doubt that she was Kairi’s sister.

Kairi laughed, loud and long into the sky, and her heart felt as light as air.

That night, Kairi slept like a rock, and dreamt that she was with Sora and Riku, the three of them pressed close on their paopu tree as they laughed and laughed about nothing at all.

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The answer to who could take the Mark of Mastery with her hit her a few days later, and it was so obvious in retrospect that she felt kind of silly about it.

She was sparring with Roxas and Xion, feeling fresh and reinvigorated after taking a couple days of rest. Destiny’s Embrace had locked blades with Roxas’ Oathkeeper, and with a shove, Kairi quickly pushed Roxas back and blew him away with a Fire spell, whipping around just in time to catch Xion’s heavy overhead swing with Oblivion. Kairi countered with a swing of her own and played a little dirty once their blades locked with a spark of light, sending Xion skidding back a few feet with a wheeze after delivering a hefty kick to her gut, left wide open.

A crack of thunder ripped the air, and Kairi held her Keyblade before her like she was about to block a hit and cast a Reflect spell, sending Roxas’ Thunder skittering across the sand.

Kairi was starting to sweat now, and she swiped her arm across her forehead, breathing heavily as
she looked between the two of them. Roxas’ spells were always ridiculous, and she was lucky that
she dodged that spell in time; she could still feel her hair standing up on end from the electricity.

She didn’t know how she’d fare if Roxas had decided to dual wield this time; he was so strong, his
attacks and magic so precise, how -?

The realization hit her so suddenly that she gasped out loud - how on earth could she have missed
such an obvious answer??

“Roxas!” She cried out, flipping away from Xion’s Blizzara spell and darting to him once she got
her footing. Roxas readied himself at her approach, light gathering in his free hand, and sent the
blast flying with light magic of her own, quickly sweeping low to kick out and take him out at the
ankles.

He wasn’t ready for that, and tumbled to the sand with a grunt, Kairi pressing a knee to his chest
and her Keyblade to his throat before he could get up.

“Take the Mark of Mastery with me,” she said in a rush, and whatever Roxas expected her to say, it
definitely wasn’t that.

“You want him to what?” Xion asked loudly behind her, and Kairi blushed a little at her blunt
demand that left Roxas more dazed than a Keyblade to the head ever could.

She dispelled her Keyblade with a flash of light, and scrambled to her feet, grabbing Roxas by the
arm to help him to his feet.

“I just –” she sputtered, cheeks still flushed, “I mean – I think it’s a good idea!! It’s, like – when
you think about it, I –”

“You want me to take the Mark of Mastery?” Roxas sounded dazed, “with you? Kairi, what?”

“I can explain!”

Xion had dispelled her Keyblade, their sparring session obviously over, and moved so she could
look at Kairi, brows wrinkled in confusion. “Well, okay. Let’s hear it.”

“Um –” She nervously tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, “well…. I’m pretty sure it’s allowed.
Sora and Riku took their exam together, so I’m sure it’ll be fine for you to take the exam, too. And
I –”

Kairi looked up, then, staring imploringly at Roxas, who still looked stunned, “I’m afraid – what if
I don’t find him? You know? The Sleeping Worlds…there’s so many. What if I can’t get to him?

Roxas, aside from Riku and myself, you’re one of the few people that are the closest to Sora. If it
was just me… I don’t know. But if it’s the two of us…” Kairi nodded, certain, “I know we could do
it. We could find him.”

Both Roxas and Xion were staring at her with wide eyes, and the longer they stared, the more Kairi
felt her confidence falter.

“…So?” She asked hesitantly, “do - do you want to?”
“I –” Roxas started to speak, his voice hoarse, and he cleared his throat, looking down at his feet, “can I…get some time to think about it?”

Kairi felt her stomach drop into her shoes, but she roughly pushed that disappointment to the side; just because he needs to think about it doesn’t mean he’s going to say no.

“Yes! Yeah, that’s fine! I’ll just –” she took a step back, looking at them, “I guess I’ll just…let you two go?”

“Actually, Kairi,” Xion placed a hand on Roxas’ shoulder, “I think I’ll leave you two alone, so you can talk and stuff. Do you know where Naminè is?”

“Uh…I think she went to the shopping square with our dad? Xion, you don’t have to, it’s fi –”

“No, this is important, Roxas,” she grabbed his hand, giving it a quick squeeze, “take a walk. Think about it. I’ll see you soon.”

She pressed a swift kiss to his cheek in goodbye and waved at them before trotting off towards the town, and then it was just her and Roxas, standing awkwardly on the beach.

“Kairi –”

“Go ahead, Roxas.” She waved him off with a small smile, “go think about it. It’s fine. We can talk whenever, I’ll be here.”

Eventually, he leaves, and Kairi sits in the sand, gathering handfuls of it as she stares out at the sea, thinking.

In the end, she ends up calling Riku.

“Kairi.” He smiles at her when he answers her call, warm and sweet; he doesn’t look as tired as he did the last time they spoke, and she sent a silent thanks out to Aqua and Terra, grateful that Riku was being watched over.

She wasn’t entirely sure what her face was doing, but whatever expression she was making made Riku’s smile fade away, and she felt horrible for it. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I –” Kairi licked her lips, nervously pulling in another handful of sand, “I was wondering…would Roxas be able to take the exam, too?”

He didn’t expect that question, and his voice stuttered to a stop, eyebrows creeping up in his surprise. “Kairi…you want Roxas to take the exam with you?”

“I…yeah.”

“What brought this on?”

Kairi hugged her knees to her chest, “I’ve just…been worrying. I don’t know if I’d be able to find Sora completely on my own. And Roxas is close to Sora, too, so it just – it makes sense, to me. Plus, everything I’ve read about the Mark of Mastery doesn’t say anything against it being done in pairs; from what I’ve seen with you and Sora, and heard from Aqua, the exam has always been done in pairs.”
Riku said nothing, so she continued talked, her nerves pushing her into babbling, “and Roxas is really strong, you know? He’s been using the Keyblade almost as long as you and Sora have, so it’d make sense for him to take the exam and everything. At least I think so.”

She reached up to fiddle with a lock of hair as she talked, eyes darting back and forth, between Riku’s pensive face and the beach.

“…Did you ask Roxas about it?” He asked, and Kairi sighed quietly, relaxing a little at finally getting a response.

“Yeah, I asked him today. Well – less ‘asked’ and more ‘sprung it on him’. The thought hit me when we were in the middle of training and I just kinda – threw it at him.”

She sheepishly rubbed her cheek, embarrassed, Riku’s laughter echoing over the tinny speakers, “don’t laugh, come on!! It was so dumb, I just blurted it out.”

“It’s such a you thing to do,” Riku laughed. “Roxas probably looked like you knocked him on the head after you just dropped that on him.”

“Shut up, no he didn’t!!!” She lied, and that just made him laugh more; Kairi always loved Riku’s laugh, but she sure wasn’t loving it right now when it was at her expense.

“Riku, stop laughing!” Kairi buried her face in her knees, whining, “it’s so embarrassing, come on. Talk about something else!! Literally anything else!!”

“Anything, huh?” Riku’s chuckling died down, and he smiled, humoring her, “well, Ventus came back, recently.”

Kairi perked up, “Ven’s back? Really?”

“Yeah, showed up at the Land of Departure a couple days ago. Ven and Terra will probably accompany Aqua to oversee the exam.”

“Oh.” Kairi’s anxiety picked up a little at the mention of the exam, and she bit her lip. “Do….is the exam taking place at the Land of Departure?”

“No. I talked to Aqua about it, and I…I’ll oversee the exam at home.”

“Really? Here?” She relaxed a little at the idea of that; if the Mark of Mastery took place here, then maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“Yeah, you’ll see. We’re still figuring it out. Anyway – I thought you wanted to talk about something else?”

“We are talking about something else,” Kairi sniffed, “but okay. How is everyone doing? How are you doing? You’re taking care of yourself, right? Not working too hard?”

“I could say the same to you. Don’t think I don’t know about the late-night training sessions you’ve been doing.”

Kairi hissed out Naminè’s name, vowing to put hair dye in her shampoo to get back at her tattling, but her ire was soothed somewhat at Riku’s laughter.
She lost track of the time as they talked, Riku updating her on how Terra, Aqua, and Ventus were doing, reassuring her that he wasn’t working too hard before asking how everything was going at home.

A tap at her shoulder pulled her out of the conversation, and Kairi’s head whipped up, taking in that the whole day passed without her knowing, the sun beginning to sink into the horizon, and Roxas was standing there, holding two sticks of ice cream.

“Riku, Roxas is here.” Kairi said in a rush, “I’ve gotta go, talk to you about it later, okay love you bye.”

“Kai –”

She quickly ended the call, and Roxas huffed out a laugh, wiggling the ice cream he bought for her in her face until she took it. “Have you just been talking to Riku all day?” He asked, sitting next to her in the sand before he began to eat his ice cream, taking time to make a displeased face over the fact that the islands still don’t have sea salt flavored ice cream he favors.

“I really miss him!” Kairi pouted, “he was barely home before he had to go and leave again. It’s weird, not having him around.”

They fell into a comfortable silence as they ate, and Kairi took the sunset in with a smile, enjoying the vibrant colors of the sky as the end of the day crept closer.

“Did you know I dreamed about Sora?”

“Huh?” Kairi whipped her head around to look at Roxas, who continued to stare at the sky as he ate, leaning back on his free hand. “Really? Roxas, you – you dreamed of him, too?”

“Of course I did.” Roxas cut her a glance out the corner of his eye, “aside from you and Riku, I’m one of the people most effected by Sora, Me, and Ven, and maybe Xion, too.”

He looked around at the islands, and his eyes were a little sad, “it looked just like this, in his heart. Just like the islands. Quiet and warm and safe. Of course I dreamed of him – how could I not?”

Roxas took a bite out of his ice cream, “it wasn’t –” he narrowed his eyes as he remembered, “it was at Twilight Town. I was sitting at the clock tower. It was just me, and then it wasn’t. Sora was just – there.”

Kairi tried to remember to keep eating her ice cream, making sure it didn’t melt and drip into the sand, but she was captivated by what Roxas was saying, wondering how this would end. “Did he – did anything happen? Did he say anything?”

“Sora’s such a chatterbox, of course he did.” Roxas polished off the last of his ice cream and began to chew on the stick, “he said he was just…checking on me, I guess. Wanted to make sure everything was alright after - after, you know.” He sighed, “honestly, I almost decked him.”

“What?! Roxas, really?!”
“I was mad! He looked like shit, Kairi! He was pale, and tired, and he looked like he’d just
disappear any minute! And I -!” He huffed, leaning forward to hook his arms over his knees, “I’ve
always -I’ve resented Sora, for a long time. The whole thing wasn’t really his fault, he didn’t have
much control over it – but I resented him anyway.

Everyone always saw me as, like – a shadow, of Sora. Whenever people looked at me, they never
saw me, you know? I was just an extension of him, and I hated him for it.”

Roxas sighed a little, looking at his hands, “I think he knew. He probably did, Sora’s pretty sharp
when it comes to things like that. The last time –”

He hesitated, wincing a little as he remembered something, “the last time I saw him in dreams,
Xheanort was about to take his heart away. And instead of trying to break free from the dreams, he
took time to tell me – I was me. My own person, and no one else. He’s foolish that way – worrying
about others before even thinking about himself. I thought about it a lot, while I walked around
today – and I’ve decided.”

He turned to face Kairi, and the light of the sunset hit his eyes, showing the flecks of gold hidden
in the brown. “I’ll take the Mark of Mastery with you, Kairi.” He smiled, “we’ve got to make sure
that he doesn’t pull a stunt like this again, after we bring him home.”

Kairi smiled back, swiping at the relieved, traitorous tears that escaped and slipped down her
cheeks. “Yeah,” she laughed, a watery sound, “thank you, Roxas. We’ll bring him back together.”

The Mark of Mastery didn’t feel as scary anymore, now that she would have a friend with her;
having Roxas join her in the Sleeping Worlds took away some of the trepidation that had been
weighing her down for the last few days.

Now, she allowed herself to have a little hope.

-o-

Two days before the Mark of Mastery was set to begin, Riku sent her a message to let her know
that he was returning home with Aqua, Terra, and Ventus in tow.

Her updated wardrobe from the good fairies had been brought to her, and now sat in its case in the
corner of her room, waiting to be used. Kairi has spent the last month training and preparing herself
as best as she could, and now, two days before the exam, there was nothing left to do.

So Kairi went to visit Sora’s parents.

She’d fallen off the radar for a bit, after Riku returned the first time and the Mark of Mastery was
brought into the equation, and Kairi felt horribly guilty about it. She made sure to stop at the
shopping centers in town, before she went to their house, making sure to grab a set of teas she knew
Aouli liked, and some chocolates for Jun; Kairi couldn’t bear just showing up empty handed after
an absence.
Gifts in hand, she quickly made her way to their house and knocked on their door, shifting from foot to foot as she waited.

Aouli opened the door, Nalani cradled in his arm, and he looked a little more tired than usual but smiled in welcome all the same. “Kairi, good to see you! How have you been?” He moved to the side, giving her room to enter the house, and she stepped in with a smile, toeing off her shoes.

“I’m fine. Sorry I’ve been gone for a while, I’ve got – there was stuff. I, um –” She held out her bag, “I got you and Jun some gifts, so. I hope you like them.”

His blue eyes lit up as he looked into the bag, and he smiled brightly at her, “Kairi, you didn’t have to do that! Thank you. Jun is sleeping, right now – Nalani was fussing most of the night, so I’ve been up with her.”

That explained how tired he looked, Kairi mused, looking the two of them over; Nalani was passed out, now, chubby cheek plastered to her father’s shoulder, brown tufts of hair flying everywhere as she slept.

“I can watch her, for a little while.” Kairi offered, holding out her hands with a smile, “you look dead on your feet, so I don’t mind keeping an eye on her for a while. We can catch up after you rest.”

“Ah…really? You don’t mind?” Aouli smiled sheepishly, rubbing at one shadowed eye with his free hand, “it wouldn’t be long, I – I got some sleep, through the night, I just need a nap –”

“It’s okay.” Kairi said firmly, “go ahead, give her to me and sleep. We’ll be here.”

Nalani stirred a little when she was transferred into Kairi’s arms, but she fell asleep soon enough, her tiny breaths brushing against the side of her neck.

“Thank you, Kairi.” Aouli looked so relieved, “I really appreciate it.”

“It’s no trouble. Go,” she smiled, rocking side to side a little to keep Nalani asleep, “sleep. I have a lot to tell you, but it can wait.”

The house was quiet, after Aouli went upstairs to sleep, but Kairi didn’t mind; it felt like the calm before the storm, in a way, a small sliver of peace before change sweeps in. For a while, Kairi stayed downstairs, lying on the couch with Nalani on her chest, fast asleep. Kairi considered taking her own nap but decided against it and chose to call Riku instead, wanting to check on him and see how close he was to home.

“Kairi? We’re not there yet, just a couple of hours away, is something wrong? Did something happen?”

He sounded so worried, as soon as the call connected, and Kairi smiled at him in reassurance, “no, everything’s fine. I was just checking in. You’re not piloting the ship, are you?”

“No, Aqua’s doing it.” He turned his phone to show Aqua at the helm, and she gave a little wave once she saw the phone pointed at her. “So everything’s good?” Riku asked again, turning his phone back to him, “nothing’s happening?”
“Nothing’s happening.” Kairi confirmed, “I’m at Sora’s place, now. I wanted to visit them for a little while, but they were tired. Nalani was fussing a lot, last night, so I volunteered to watch the baby while they slept.”

“A baby?!”

“Hey!!” Riku complained loudly as he was shoved to the side, Ventus poking his head into frame, pale green eyes wide as he focused on Kairi.

“Kairi!! A baby?? What??”

“Hi, Ven!” Kairi laughed, careful to make sure she wasn’t loud enough to wake anyone up, “yeah, you’ve missed a lot, while you were gone! Sora’s parents had a baby a couple months ago, so now Sora has a little sister!”

She moved her phone around so Ven could see Nalani’s little face, smooshed up against Kairi’s neck, and Ven cooed, pressing a hand to his chest. “She’s so cute –”

He squawked as Riku shoved him away, his own face coming back into frame, “don’t you have your own gummiphone?!”

“Yeah, but you’re talking to Kairi right now anyway!! I can’t believe there’s a baby!!”

Riku rolled his eyes as Kairi laughed quietly into her hand, still taking care to not wake anyone up. “As you can see, Kairi, everything’s alright over here. We’ll be there soon, okay?”

“Soon.” She agreed, “see you then.”

Disconnecting the call, Kairi carefully sat back up, trying not to jostle Nalani awake as she rose to her feet. Quietly, she crept up the stairs and down the hall, stopping in front of a door, still shut tight from the rest of the world.

Tracing a finger along one of the stars stuck to the door, Kairi absently swayed as she considered the door to the room.

Sora’s room.

She reached out and wrapped her fingers around the doorknob, slowly turning it, and let out a quiet breath of relief when the door clicked open.

The air in the room was a little stale, from being cut off from everyone for almost a year; but even then, there were still signs of care – the bed, made neat and tidy, clothes neatly put away, knick-knacks and random things that caught Sora’s eye neatly arranged on bookshelves and dressers. Next to a small jar of shells, Kairi’s charm was lovingly propped up, beaming out into the empty room, and her heart ached.

Kairi could feel Nalani start to stir, and she sat on the bed, moving the infant into the cradle of her arm as she slowly woke up, yawning widely before staring up at her, confused.

“Hey, Na-Na,” She cooed softly, brushing a finger over a chubby cheek, “did you have a nice nap? Dream about anything good?”
Nalani began to gnaw on her fingers, still sleepily blinking up at Kairi as she gurgled around her fist; the flecks of brown in her eyes glittered whenever the sun hit them, and she took a minute to just look, smiling at the noises Nalani continued to make.

“That sounds like a pretty good dream,” Kairi agreed, poking Nalani’s cheek and letting her grab her finger with a spit-covered hand. Scooting further onto the bed, Kairi unlocked the window and pushed it open, letting fresh air into the room. The curtains billowed in the warm air, and Kairi only felt a little sad that the room didn’t smell like Sora anymore.

Nalani was gumming at her finger now, eyes darting around and taking in the unfamiliar space, and Kairi leaned against the headboard of Sora’s bed with a sigh.

“This is your big brother’s room,” she explained, eyes drifting to the photos sitting on the nightstand near the bed. “He – it hasn’t been used, for a while, ‘cause your big brother, he’s been gone for a bit.”

A lump grew in her throat, and Kairi tried to swallow it down with a shaky sigh. “He’s been gone because of me,” she admitted in a whisper, “but also because your big brother is a little reckless, and is bad at taking care of himself, sometimes.

But that’s okay, because he has your mom and dad, and me, and Uncle Riku. And so many others – your brother has the most amazing ability to connect with anyone, and he has so many friends now because of it.”

A line of drool slipped down Nalani’s chin, and Kairi wiped it away with her thumb, “and in a couple days, you’ll get to see him, too.” She promised, her jaw setting in determination, “because I’m going to go and find him and bring him home.”

The door to Sora’s room opened further, just then, the soft creak of the wood startling Kairi, and she sharply turned her head with a frightened gasp, heart jumping up into her throat.

“Oh!” Kairi sighed in relief as Jun hesitantly stepped into the doorway, eyes darting around the room, “You startled me. Have you been up long?”

Jun’s eyes slid back to her, and she looked at Kairi like it was the first time seeing her as she took two more hesitant steps into the room, pressing a hand over her heart. “Kairi…” her voice, so quiet, trembled slightly, “you – you found him?”

Kairi stiffened, a chill skittering down her spine at the question; she didn’t know Jun had heard her – now she had to wonder just how much she had heard.

She wanted to groan, but instead Kairi looked down at Nalani, still gnawing on her finger, and licked her suddenly dry lips. “…” she looked up at Jun through her bangs and couldn’t bear to handwave away the desperate hope she saw there, “yes. We found him. We – we’re going to bring him home, in a couple days.”

She saw Jun’s knees waver, and before Kairi could hop up to help her, she stumbled the rest of the way into the room and collapsed at the foot of Sora’s bed, hand still pressed over her heart.
“How,” she gasped, eyes shining with tears, “how – Kairi, how did you find him?? Where is he??”

Kairi shook her head, “I can’t tell you. I want to!” She quickly added as Jun opened her mouth, outraged, “I want to tell you so badly, but I don’t know how. I don’t know if I can. I just – I just need you to trust me.”

She looked at Jun, eyes wide and so earnest, “Riku and I found him. We’re going to bring him home. And if we can, we’ll tell you everything. Everything, I swear. Riku and I, we –” she sighed, suddenly so tired, “we don’t want to keep anything from you all, anymore. I don’t know if Sora will want to, either. So much has just…I don’t know.”

It would be so easy to just come clean now, to tell Jun the entire sordid tale of the last few years of their lives, but Kairi couldn’t bear to tell that story alone.

Kairi felt Jun put a hand on her knee and snapped out of her trance to stare at Jun, wide eyed. Pressing her lips into a thin line, Jun nodded sharply, giving her knee a squeeze, “I will trust you.” She finally said, “I will trust you, and hope that you will be honest with us in return.”

“That’s all I want.” She already felt so relieved at being relatively honest with her, the weight of the secrets they were keeping slightly lifted from her shoulders.

Jun smiled wanly at her, eyes drifting down to Nalani, who was still happily gumming away at Kairi’s finger, completely oblivious to the aura in the room.

“I should probably feed her,” she finally said, her smile curving into something a little warmer, “it’s probably why she’s been attacking your finger this whole time.”

“Oh! I should’ve guessed, sorry, here –” She passed Nalani over, and Jun cradled her in her arms, easy as anything.

Kairi averted her eyes as Nalani was fed, turning her head to gaze outside, staring at the large clumps of clouds that floated by.

“It was so strange,” Jun said absently, breaking the silence, “before Nalani was born I just…felt this absence. I remember telling you that this baby was my first, but it didn’t feel true. I felt like I’d done this before in – in a dream. It felt like a dream, then. And then Nalani was born, and one day it all just rushed back, and I –”

Her voice cracked, and Kairi felt terrible, felt so helpless in the face of Jun’s pain. “I don’t understand – how could I forget Sora? How could I forget my own baby? I carried him, birthed him in the ocean just like I did with Nalani. I watched him laugh, and run, and grow and I just – forgot every second. How does that happen?”

Kairi finally turned her head to look at Jun, and stared into her watery brown eyes, cheeks wet with tears.

“I need to understand why,” Jun said, voice trembling horribly even though her hold on Nalani was rock steady. “I need to know what force is out there that can just – make me forget my son. So please, Kairi.”

More tears poured from her eyes, and Jun swiped them away with the heel of her palm.
“Just – bring Sora back home to me.”

The day of the Mark of Mastery exam, it was humid and cloudy. It felt like it was about to storm.

When Kairi woke up, the anxiety that dogged her steps for the last month was absent; instead, calm was in its place, and Kairi slowly got dressed, feeling as cool and tranquil as the surface of a lake.

Her updated clothes from the good fairies were perfect and fit her exact specifications; the gloves were snug and comfortable, and the skirt had been altered into a skort, reassuring her that she wouldn’t accidentally flash someone in the middle of combat. As she laced up her boots, Kairi felt as ready as she could be, and took a deep, steadying breath as she left her room.

Naminè was waiting for her downstairs, already dressed and ready to go, and gave Kairi a comforting smile as she waited at the door. “I left a note for dad, so he won’t have to worry.”

Naminè explained as she led them outside, “do you want to eat something?”

“I don’t know if I can,” Kairi admitted, and with an understanding nod from Naminè, they headed to the play islands.

Everyone was already there – Riku left a message as she got dressed to inform her, and though she felt a little bad at the thought of keeping everyone waiting, she was selfishly glad that once she got there, she wouldn’t be left to wait and worry.

When they arrived, Kairi saw Riku at a distance, quietly talking to Terra, Aqua, and Ventus, pensive looks on their faces. They weren’t dressed in their protective armor at all – all four of them were dressed comfortably, like they were all meeting for a fun trip to the beach.

Roxas and Xion were sitting a little further away from them, heads bent close as they spoke in whispers. Lea was a short ways away from them, leaning against the trunk of a tree, arms crossed, eyes closed; Kairi knew he wasn’t sleeping, though.

Naminè gave Kairi’s hand a soft squeeze, quietly wishing her luck before separating and heading towards Roxas and Xion, placing a gentle hand on their backs to get their attention.

Kairi drifted over to Riku, feeling only slightly bad about interrupting the conversation he was having, but the guilt went away quickly when she saw the way his face lit up once he noticed her approach. Riku quickly said something to Aqua before breaking away from the group, jogging to meet her halfway and sweep her into his arms.

“Hey,” he murmured, pressing a soft kiss into her hair, “you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Kairi buried her face into Riku’s shoulder with a quiet sigh, relishing in the warmth his hug gave her. “I’m glad you’re back.” She mumbled into his shirt, “I really missed you.”
“I missed you, too.” Riku gave her one more squeeze before stepping back with a smile, “after this, I won’t have to leave for a long while, I promise.”

Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Kairi wanted to say; knowing their luck, who knows how much time they would have together before being split apart again. She held her tongue, though, and kept his promise close with a smile as Riku turned back to nod at Aqua, ready to start the exam.

“Roxas, Kairi,” Riku called, “step into the water. We’re ready to start.”

The two of them shared a look as they cautiously stepped into the sea, wondering what part this was going to play in their exam. Kairi winced slightly as the seawater weighed down her boots, and she saw Roxas cringe in discomfort in the corner of her eye. Riku and Aqua stepped forward, and though they were dressed casually, they were still every inch a Keyblade Master, standing tall with their Keyblades at their sides.

“Roxas, Kairi,” Aqua began, “you two have been chosen for the Mark of Mastery. You two, as the Keyblade’s chosen, will be tested in your strength of heart.”

Riku steps in, “your parameters for the exam are as such -you are to travel through the Realm of Sleep and gather Sora’s fragmented heart as you awaken the Sleeping Worlds. Travel until you have found all the fragments and return to safely to the Realm of Light. If you achieve that, then you will both be dubbed Masters. Do you understand?”

The two of them nodded sharply, and Riku smiled at them, pleased. “Good. Be safe, both of you. May your heart be your guiding key.”

Aqua raised Stormfall as he lifted Braveheart, the Masters pointing their Keyblades at their feet. The water beneath them began to glow, and Kairi had started to wonder just how she and Roxas would be entering the Sleeping Worlds when she noticed the water pulling away faster than it should, exposing their feet and the sand beneath, sigils glowing brightly.

A growing roar reached her ears, and Kairi turned around in time to see the tidal wave at their backs, bigger than anything she’s ever seen, towering heads above them. The roaring increased, louder, louder, and Kairi snapped out and clutched Roxas’ hand in a fierce grip, just seconds before the tidal wave overcame them, slamming them into the ground.

Except suddenly there was no ground, and Kairi was falling, bubbles filling her vision as she spun, tumbling over and over as she tried to hold her breath. She was dizzy, had no idea which way was up, and she was still falling, still spinning round and round, disoriented.

She felt Roxas’ hand slip out of hers, rings scraping against her skin, and she panicked, frantically reaching for him, trying to see any trace of him through the blinding wave of ocean, of bubbles – but he wasn’t there.

Suddenly, the water gave way to open air, and Kairi was cold, soaked to the bone, terrified and still falling, Roxas nowhere to be found.

Kairi was helpless, and she squeezed her eyes shut and reached, stretching out her senses to find
that light she knew and loved so much. She felt him – she felt him, faint, fragmented, scattered so far, and Kairi randomly reached for one fragment and hoped, wildly, that Roxas would be able to find her.

_Sora_, she thought desperately, fiercely determined to line the pieces of him up, to bring him back to the Realm of Light, safe and whole. _Sora!!_

She would bring him back – there was no other option.

And that was the last thought she had, before everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

[beyonce voice] you ready?

I'm gonna be gone for a minute 'cause I want to plan every world out and make sure this arc is at its best. I suck at action/combat descriptions, so trying to describe this whole exam is going to be a fun challenge. I'm so pumped!!! I hope y'all enjoy the worlds I've decided to use.

comments and kudos are so loved, as always. and hopefully I won't be planning for too long lmao.

see you soon (fingers crossed)!!!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

bitch I'm back. by popular demand.

hoooo boy this was HARD AS FUCK. did y'all know how hard writing combat was?? because I had no fucking idea!!! I had to re-write the fight scene like THREE TIMES before I was satisfied. and don't even get me STARTED on all the research I had to do on kingdom hearts lore, lord ABOVE.

when re-reading the story for 3D, I remembered that riku and sora started their exam and entered the sleeping worlds via time travel. and I promptly ignored that because deadass fuck time travel. my least favorite trope. I won't do it.

anyway. this one was a doozy, so I hope it passes muster. my god did I try. unbeta'd as usual, all edits by me to the best of my ability.

and now! here we go! world one let's GET IT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something was gently nudging at her cheek.

Kairi groaned, and her fingers curled into muddy water as she slowly opened her eyes, shakily pushing herself onto her knees as she tried to take in her surroundings. She couldn't see much of anything, but after a few minutes of squinting into the dark, her eyes adjusted enough to the faint light that she saw that she was in some kind of… swamp. Silvery moonlight cut through the trees, giving her the faint outline of low hanging branches, dripping with moss, and all around her there was the faint, golden glow of fireflies.

She couldn’t see a hint of Roxas anywhere, spending a few moments feeling around, hoping to bump into him, but only feeling mud and moss.

Kairi was alone.

Her lower lip trembled slightly, daunted at the fact that she would have to travel this new world on her own, but before she could spiral into a fit of panic, another gentle nudge brushed against her cheek, followed by a soft chirp in her ear.

Looking down, Kairi saw a dragon the size of a cat, wrapped around her neck like a stole; it was a bright, vibrant green, giving off such a glow of its own that Kairi wondered how she missed it, and there was a peach colored emblem on its forehead. She reached out to brush a finger over the symbol, and the dragon cooed, nuzzling into her touch.

A Dream Eater.

Riku had told her about these, before, and their purpose in the Sleeping Worlds, and she relaxed, grateful that one had found her so quickly. “Hello,” Kairi said quietly, “sorry I didn’t notice you, at
first. Are you here to help me?”

The dragon blinked at her, saying nothing, and Kairi didn’t really expect any kind of response, but she took it as a confirmation anyway. “Well…good. I’m glad I’m not entirely alone, at least. I can’t see Roxas at all, so I guess we got split up.”

Admitting that made her a little worried, and Kairi hoped that she wouldn’t be split from Roxas the entire time; a part of her still hoped that maybe he did end up on this world, and that they would run into each other eventually.

“Well,” Kairi began to stand up, “we won’t find what we’re looking for if we keep sitting around, right? Let’s go!”

Her dragon chirped in response, and with that, Kairi picked a direction and set off, heading towards a particularly thick smattering of fireflies. The dense packing of the trees thinned a bit as she walked, and Kairi was able to take in her surroundings a little more, thick shafts of moonlight breaking through to clear the way.

The trunks of the trees curved now and then, the roots sticking out of the water, large enough to make Kairi wonder if she could walk across them, instead of having to wade through water constantly. The air was warm and humid, and the moonlight made the moss hanging off the lower branches of the trees look like spun silver, and the ample number of fireflies that surrounded her bobbed to and fro amongst the trees gave the area an additional golden glow.

It would be horribly romantic, if only Kairi didn’t feel like a fright, smeared with mud and still damp from her abrupt entry into the Sleeping Worlds. “If I run into a person, it’s going to be horribly embarrassing.” She mused aloud, staring at her mud-streaked arms and legs, “if there’s even any people around. But that’s ridiculous, right? There’s always people – it’s a world.”

There was obviously a reason that she got dumped in the mud in the middle of a swamp, and she was going to find it; she followed that faint light, that piece of Sora’s heart, and she ended up here. If she was meant to land in the town area of this world, then she would’ve ended up there – her heart would never steer her wrong.

With that in mind, Kairi closed her eyes, stretched out her senses, and continued to follow the fireflies as she waded through the swamp, using Sora’s faint light as a touchstone.

It felt a little peaceful, after a while, but Kairi made sure to stay aware of her surroundings as she walked, eyes occasionally darting to the shadows while her dragon chirped away around her neck, completely at ease.

“It’s starting to get a little bored.” Kairi finally admitted to the air as she hopped over a particularly large tree root. “I feel like I’ve been walking forever, but I know I haven’t. But I feel like something should be happening! Shouldn’t it be more…exciting? The way Sora and Riku talked about their exam, I figured mine would have some kind of peril in it. But maybe –”

Kairi’s rambling cut off when she noticed that her dragon companion had stopped chirping and was now growling, hooked claws digging into her jacket as it stared out at the shadows. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, and with a flick of her wrist, Destiny’s Embrace was in her hand in a
...Okay,” Kairi said, slowly falling into a defensive stance, not looking away from the shadows, “I guess something’s happening now. Hello?” She raised her voice, “is someone there? You can come out, it’s fi –”

Something darted out of the shadows, and Kairi raised her Keyblade in time to block a snake coming at her, the size of its head as big as her torso, large fangs catching on her blade. She stared at the venom dripping off its fangs with wide eyes, and quickly shoved it back, swinging her blade around to chop the snake’s head off, watching it dissolve into shadows at her feet. Something else darted out of the shadows at her back, and Kairi quickly ducked, dodging a bite from another outrageously large snake.

“What the hell is this??” Kairi gasped. “Where is this coming from??”

Her dragon reared up and released a rush of flame, and the snake dropped to the ground, writhing at the flames before dissolving with a wisp of smoke.

The area around her filled with hissing, and Kairi hopped to her feet as piercing red eyes began to appear, scattered across the shadows that weren’t dotted by fireflies. Her dragon let out another stream of flame, flapping its wings, and Kairi kept her Keyblade at the ready, eyes bouncing among the red eyes that surrounded her. “Okay,” Kairi whispered, “I think it’s time to go.”

She pointed her Keyblade at the eyes before her, and cast a Fire spell, sending a fireball out into the darkness. The fire illuminated the shadows, showing four more large snakes, and the low hissing morphed into shrieks as they burst into flame. Kairi didn’t wait to see them disappear and took off at a dead sprint, pressing a hand onto her dragon’s back to keep it close. Another snake struck out from behind, and Kairi quickly ducked, swiping out and taking off the head of another snake that went to bite at her side.

Her heart was pounding in her ears as she ran, leaping over tree roots as she sprinted further into the swamp, Sora’s faint light calling her forward like a beacon. The sounds of hissing increased at her back, and Kairi scowled and skid to a stop, whipping around to face the few red eyes that stared out at her from the shadows, gripping Destiny’s Embrace tightly with both hands. Baring her teeth, she raised her Keyblade above her head, pointing it towards the sky, “stop following me!!” she cried out. “Leave me alone!!”

Thunder split the air with a crack loud enough to shake the ground, and the remaining monsters that were following her were quickly rid by the spell she cast, fading into smoke with high pitched screeches as jagged streaks of lightning filled the area.

The air fell silent, and Kairi lowered her Keyblade, panting, rapidly scanning the area to confirm that she was truly alone. She could no longer hear any of the ominous hissing, the only sound filling the area being her rapid breath and the various cries of birds and bugs – she was safe. For the moment.

“Okay,” Kairi whispered to herself, clutching her Keyblade tightly, “okay. It’s fine now.” She reached up and ran a hand down her Dream Eater’s back, “thanks for the heads up – I would probably be in pretty bad shape without you.”
Her dragon cooed at her, back to being perfectly sweet now that the threat had passed, and Kairi was about to resume her trek further into the swamp when a voice made her freeze in place.

“Don’t come any closer.”

The voice seemed to simultaneously echo in her head and in the space around her, and Kairi stumbled in place as she whipped around, confused, holding her Keyblade in a ready stance.

“Wh-huh?? Who said that? Who’s there!!”

“The bayou isn’t safe.” The voice said – a young woman, her voice tight with fear – “it’s not safe for people, not anymore. You need to go back to the city. How on earth did you even end up this far, anyway?”

“I –” Kairi took a tentative step forward, “I – I ended up here. I’m….I’m looking for something, and I was sent here to help in the process.”

“…Help?” The woman’s voice lightened up a bit at that, hope gathering at the edges of her tone, “you…you could help with this? These monsters?”

“I can!” Kairi nodded furiously, even though she was pretty sure the woman couldn’t see her, “It’s what I do!! That’s why I was sent here, I – I’m here to find something but I’ll always help someone that needs it. My name’s Kairi, by the way. What’s yours?”

“Kairi…my name is Tiana.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tiana.” Kairi slowly continued her walk, pushing a curtain of moss out of the way, “do you know where you are? So I can get to you?”

“I…yes. I’m – I’m as far into the bayou as I could go. Somewhere people couldn’t get to. I’ll – I’ll have the fireflies guide you, hold on –”

One by one, the fireflies around her slowly began to drift from the area and form a neat line, creating a fine golden chain for Kairi to follow into the bayou.

“Thank you,” Kairi said warmly, beginning to follow the helpful path Tiana had generously given her. “Why are you in this bayou, anyway? How did you end up here?”

Tiana fell silent, and she was quiet for so long that Kairi worried that their connection had dissipated, but eventually her voice returned.

“I don’t know how long I’ve been here,” she finally admitted, weary, “I feel like I’ve been here for the longest time, holding this back.”

“Holding what back?”

“The darkness.”

The hairs on her neck rose at that, her grip on her Keyblade tightening, “….darkness?”

“Yes. From the Shadow Man.”

“The who?”
Tiana laughed quietly, “I can explain.”

Kairi nodded and held her tongue and hoped that her silence gave off the attentive air she was going for.

“A – a couple of years ago, my home had a little…trouble, from the Shadow Man. He was a local witch doctor that was dabbling with forces he shouldn’t have, and he got greedy. He’d always been a greedy man, and it just slowly ate him up inside. I didn’t mean to, but I got swept up into his whole plot because he – well. He was planning on using a friend of mine in his plans. And my husband. If the Shadow Man got his way, everyone’s souls would’ve gotten swept up in the aftermath.

We stopped him, of course, and for a while it – everything was really good. I opened a restaurant. I got married. There was peace, and I worked for it, I fought for it. But then –”

Tiana’s voice faltered, and Kairi’s pace slowed a little at that. “…But then?” She prodded gently, and that brought Tiana back from wherever she’d went.

“But then one day, there was a storm. A horrible storm, stronger than anything I’d ever seen. I – and I felt this horrible thing….this darkness. I just can’t explain it, but I felt it just…leaking out into the world. It felt rancid – it made me sick. Like all the lights were being snuffed out.”

Kairi suddenly felt fourteen years old again at Tiana’s description, deep rumbles of thunder rolling in the distance as she stood in the secret place, darkness rushing out over their home, smothering her. She remembered how ill she felt, how weak, nausea churning her stomach at the bitter rotten taste of darkness all around her, Destiny Islands beginning to crumble from the inside out.

Her stomach jumped as she remembered Yen Sid’s words during the war, of how the revived Organization were tracking down the new Princesses of Heart as a contingency plan, in case the Keyblade wielders fell short, and she marveled at her luck of connecting with one of the new Princesses of Heart. I didn’t expect my exam to turn out like this, she thought in wonder.

“I don’t really remember what happened, after that.” Tiana continued, pulling Kairi back to the present, “It almost feels like – like some bad dream. But I felt this darkness, here deep in the bayou, and I didn’t know if I could really do anything but I just – I had to do something, to keep it away from everyone. And somehow…I have.”

Tiana sounded awed, marveling at whatever she did to keep the darkness at bay. “I’ve been holding it back for as long as I could. I don’t know how long I’ve been here, but I –” She sighed, sounding so weary, “I don’t know how long I can keep it back. The darkness…the monster…it slips past me, sometimes. I’ve been able to catch it, and pull it back, but I -for my family, I’ll hold it for as long as I can – I just can’t let something like this harm my home.”

Kairi’s heart ached at the touch of longing she heard in Tiana’s voice at the mention of her family, at the pain of the thought of being so close to home, of being able to feel the presence of your loved ones but being unable to be with them to keep them safe.

She was amazed at Tiana, who was being so brave and fighting so hard on her own, but she scowled because she shouldn’t have had to fight alone.
Curling her hands into fists, Kairi straightened her shoulders, chest puffing out a little in her determination, “Tiana, I’m going to find you!” She declared, “I’m going to find you, and defeat this monster for you, so you can go home! You’re not going to fight this alone anymore – you never should have had to!!”

“Kairi –”

“I’ll be there soon, okay?” she picked up her pace, moving into a light run as she continued to follow her chain of fireflies, “until then, tell me about your home, and your family -you said you had a restaurant? And your husband, what is he like?”

Tiana’s voice brightened as she spoke about her home, the restaurant she worked so hard to own, and her doting husband that helps her with the business. She spoke of her childhood friend, and her mother, and the light of Tiana’s joy was brighter than any star, shining radiantly from deep within the bayou.

Kairi grinned at her success of helping lift Tiana’s spirits, just a little, and continued following her path of fireflies, watching the night slowly begin to bleed away into dawn.

She was so caught up in listening to Tiana that she didn’t see the snake until it struck.

A large force slammed into Kairi’s side, knocking all the breath out of her in a harsh wheeze, and she felt a stabbing pain in her gut as the snake’s fangs sunk into her belly. The force behind the collision sent Kairi flying, and she cried out in pain as she was forced off the path, landing in a heap into a clearing filled with glowing red eyes.

There seemed to be more than the last time, Kairi noted as she struggled to her feet, grabbing her Keyblade as she fell back into her stance. How could there be more already? Where on earth were these things coming from?

I don’t know how long I can keep it back. The darkness…the monster…it slips past me, sometimes.

Oh. Kairi’s eyes widened a little at the realization – the possibility that these are part of the darkness that Tiana was trying to hold back. She couldn’t see the insignia Riku explained to her, signifying that the monster was a Nightmare, and Kairi wondered if these were little roadblocks meant to block her path, or a smaller part of something much bigger, waiting for her deep within the bayou.

A cold, numb feeling was beginning to spread from where the snake bit her, and Kairi shivered at the eyes on her, at the darkness filling the air, and wondered if she would be able to escape.

Her Dream Eater raised itself up, wings flapping as it roared at the monsters, and that was the only warning she got before the monsters struck.

Kairi struggled as she fought against the onslaught, the cold numbness turning painful as she moved, spreading further across her torso from where she was bitten, the familiar metallic rot of darkness coating her tongue.
She wanted to cast a Cure spell to take the slow poisoning away, but she couldn’t get the time to focus, having to jump, dodge, and roll away from constant attacks. Her Dream Eater was a continuous help, flying away from her to slash at any monsters, returning now and then to wind around her and release a stream of flames.

She cut off as many of the heads as she could, but there were so many she eventually just resorted to magic, casting Reflect to make the snakes bounce away when one tried to strike, surrounding herself with Thunder and Fire to cut the numbers down.

Sweat dripped off her chin, and her vision started to blur as the numbness continued to spread, making some of her spells miss, her swings sloppy. Her lagging reaction time gave her enemies an opening, and Kairi had a few nicks on her arms to show for it from attempting to dodge but not being fast enough to completely avoid the scrape of venomous fangs. Another large snake lunged at her, and Kairi quickly ducked, falling to her knees as the bite passed over her, the wind ruffling her hair.

Panting, Kairi tried to rise back to her feet, but her legs wouldn’t cooperate, and she slumped back onto the ground, shaking. She pressed a hand to her wounded stomach as she looked out at the monsters that remained, and her heart trembled with fear at the thought of this being it for her, overtaken by Nightmares and trapped in the Sleeping Worlds forever.

The thought of being lost here, forever, of never seeing Riku or her friends and family…of Sora, already so lost, but now out of her reach forever - Kairi felt bile rise in her at the thought, and urged her shaking legs to move, determined to keep fighting. Her dragon hissed, letting out a wave of flame, and Kairi shot out a desperate Fire spell, closing her eyes. Sora…I –

The area was suddenly filled with a blinding golden light.

Hissing and inhuman screams filled Kairi’s ears, and she covered her eyes as best as she could, scooping her Dream Eater close to her chest and curling over her lap. Eventually, the screams died down, and when Kairi opened her eyes, the clearing was empty, smatterings of golden light slowly fading away.

“Ha! Still got it!”

Kairi tried to blink the blurriness out of her vision to get a good look at her savior, and as she slowly slumped to the ground on her side, all she was able to see was a smudge of white before everything went dark.

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Slowly, Kairi drifted awake, and the first thing she noticed was that she was dry.

She groaned a little, shifting in place, and her eyes shot open when her resting place rocked a little at her movements. Kairi slowly turned her head, wanting to take in her surroundings, and saw that she was in a hammock, a blanket draped over her as she slept. Her Dream Eater was there, curled up in a tight ball on her chest, keeping watch over her, and it perked up a little when it saw she was
awake.

Her dragon moved to wind around her shoulders as she slowly sat up, blanket falling to her lap as she took in her surroundings. The area was filled to the brim with knick-knacks – bottles, ropes, barrels, and other sorts of things scattered all around. A rich, savory scent was drifting towards her from further within the boat, and Kairi’s stomach grumbled a little at the thought of food.

As she took in the shape of the dwelling, Kairi judged that they were in a boat, even though she couldn’t feel the rocking of the water, and slowly wriggled out of her hammock to lower herself onto the ground with a quiet ‘thump’.

“You awake now, girl?”

Kairi’s heart jumped in her chest, and she squeaked loudly, startled. “What -?! Who - ?!”

A laugh, “come on, now, come here - I don’t bite!”

She shuffled forward, hesitant, still looking at her surroundings, occasionally distracted by some new something – or – other that caught her attention and stopped once she reached the center of the boat. A large wicker chair was sitting in the center of the room, entwined with tree branches that were growing through the bottom of the boat. Rows of melted candles draped across the branches, flickering with small flames, and colorful glass bottles full of light dangled from the ceiling, flooding the room with a warm, colorful glow.

A few feet away from the large chair was a bathtub, the space underneath it glowing with heat, and apparently the source of the smell of food that was tickling Kairi’s nose. Thick chains of peppers and garlic hung from the ceiling, draped across the room, baskets of tomatoes and various vegetables hanging in bushels. Ceramic pots full to bursting with what Kairi assumed were herbs sat around the foot of the tub, within arm’s reach, and at the center of it all was a woman, slowly stirring something in the tub as she hummed under her breath.

She was short, shorter than her, and old, her dark skin folding in soft wrinkles. Her hair was wrapped up in a white turban, and she wore a matching white dress, draped in gold jewelry. Her bare feet tapped along to a tune only she could hear, and when the woman turned at the sound of Kairi’s slow approach, she saw that there were black spectacles on her face, hiding her eyes.

“There you are!” The woman smiled at her, the wrinkles around her eyes creasing deeply, and Kairi couldn’t help but smile back shyly. “You’re lookin’ a lot better – you looked a right fright when I found you! Feel okay? You were out for quite a while!”

“Ah – yeah.” Kairi pressed a hand to her stomach, taking in the absence of pain, and moved her arms and legs to test the returned strength to her limbs. Her clothes were completely dry, and her skin was cleared of mud, and Kairi felt so grateful. “Thank you so much, really. I – I thought I wasn’t going to make it.”

“You wouldn’t have.” The woman stopped stirring and fully turned to face Kairi, “you’re lucky that Tiana sent me to you when she did – if I were any later, that Shadow Man would’ve snuffed your light right out.”

“Tiana? You know her?”

“Know her? Ha! They came to me for help the first time the Shadow Man was running around, causing trouble! If they didn’t get their act together when they did, city would’ve been doomed!
Are you hungry? ‘Cause I know I am – Juju!’ She suddenly hollered, making Kairi jump, “come here and help me find those bowls! Juju!”

Something slipped around her ankles, and Kairi looked down and shrieked at the large snake slithering around her legs, eagerly making its way towards the woman. She scrambled back in her panic, and the woman cackled, picking the snake up and giving it a sound kiss on the top of its head once it reached her, “this is my Juju! He don’t bite, don’t worry – he’s my sweetheart.”

With Juju’s help, using the snake as a cane, she was able to successfully find a set of bowls, and after scooping two hearty spoonfuls out of her makeshift pot, Juju lead her to the large wicker chair while Kairi sat on the floor a few feet away, stirring her spoon around in her food. “What’s this?”

“Gumbo.” The woman was already eating, humming happily, “Tiana’s recipe. You’ll like it.”

Kairi raised a hefty spoonful to her mouth, curious to try something Tiana had a part in making and squeaked in delight at the burst of flavors across her tongue. “This is so good,” she garbled, shoving more food into her mouth, “thank you so much, miss -?”

“’Miss’, she says,” the woman cackles, “how polite! Name’s Mama Odie – folk ‘round here know me as the voodoo queen of this bayou. You got a name?”

“Oh – yeah! Sorry! I’m Kairi.”

“Kairi,” Mama Odie drawled, “got a reason to be out here in this bayou, Kairi?”

Mama Odie’s eyes were hidden by her black sunglasses, and she knew that she was blind, yet Kairi still felt that Mama Odie could see to the heart of her – who she was, why she was there, the deepest, most selfish desires of her heart. She shifted in place a little, feeling incredibly exposed, “I…I’m here to search for something. It’s important that I find it – it’ll help save someone – someone I care about very much and bring them back to me. Until I find it, I’m going to help people that need it.” Kairi took a nervous bite of her food, eyes drifting down to her lap, “no one should have to fight the way Tiana’s fighting, all alone.” She murmured, “so I’ll find her and help her.”

The woman stared at her impassively, and Kairi squirmed, shoving another nervous mouthful of food into her mouth.

She could only relax once Mama Odie smiled at her, nodding to herself as she placed her empty bowl to the side. “Good to hear,” she approved, “it’s good she’ll have help – Tiana has been dealing with that remnant for too long.”

“About that –” Kairi placed her own empty bowl at her side, “– who is this Shadow Man that you two have mentioned? He’s the reason for this monster?”

“Aah,” Mama Odie sighed, scowling, “Faciller.”

“That’s his name? Is he controlling this thing?”

“No. He is that beast, in a way.” Mama Odie reclined in her seat, lacing her fingers over her belly, “Faciller was always a scheming man – he was greedy, wanted nothing but money and power. And that greed ate him up and made him dabble and rely on powers that he shouldn’t have made deals
Black magic always comes with a price, see – you make a deal like that, and the forces of the other side **will** collect, one way or another. Faciller bartered the souls of everyone in the city for power, and when he couldn’t deliver because he was stopped, they got their soul another way.”

She frowned, grim, “Faciller may be gone, but his spirit still lingers, in a way. The darkness he brought – his greed, his anger - it still clings to this world. He brought that storm, and this monster – his greed and dealing with the darker side of magic affects us still.”

Juju, who had curled around Mama Odie’s feet, suddenly perked up, staring at the entrance to the boat, and Mama Odie sighed loudly, heaving herself out of the chair and onto her feet. “Lord, here comes that boy.”

**“Mama Odie!!”**

A young man burst into the boat, running a frantic hand through his hair, **“Mama Odie, I – I need your help, I -! Tiana, she’s been missing for days, weeks, I - I’ve looked everywhere and can’t find her, I don’t –”**

“Naveen!” Mama Odie snapped, **“you know good and well that you shouldn’t have come this far into the bayou!! It’s dangerous!! How did you get here?!”**

“Louis brought me,” he admitted in a rush, **“I asked him to. The fireflies lit the rest of the way. Mama Odie, please.”** His voice cracked, **“I’m desperate. After that storm – I’ve looked everywhere, but I’ve lost her. Please, I just want to find my wife. I just want to bring her home.”**

“Um,” Kairi piped up nervously, and whatever additional words she had on her tongue quickly died when Naveen turned to look at her with wide amber eyes.

Even though he looked so worried, Kairi had never met such an attractive man in her entire life. She sputtered to a stop for a second, blushing violently to the tops of her ears, and her eyes quickly darted down to her lap, reaching up to place a nervous hand on her Dream Eater’s back. “I – uh –” Mama Odie snickered at her stuttering, and that just made Kairi blush more, **“I’m – I know where Tiana is! I’m going to go find her and – and bring her home.”**

She peeked up through her lashes at him, and hope made Naveen’s face radiant, and her eyes dropped back down to her lap. She couldn’t handle that.

“You found her?” He breathed, “You know where she is? I – you – can you take me with you? Can you bring me to her, I –”

“No!”

Naveen blinked at Kairi’s sharp refusal, and she softened a little, “it’s too dangerous! I don’t know how you were able to make it this far on your own – I almost didn’t make it, but Mama Odie found me.”

She placed a hand over her heart, eyes glittering fiercely, “Tiana and I, we’re connected, in a really unique way. I can understand where she is and what she’s doing right now because I’ve been there, too! So just – trust in me! I’m gonna find her for you, and I’ll bring her back!”
Naveen’s face crumpled a little, “you swear?” His voice was a thin whisper, “do you promise you’ll bring her back?”

“I swear.” Kairi stressed, “I will bring her back. No matter what.”

-o-

Mama Odie made Kairi rest a little while longer before sending her out, saying that she had a few things to prepare for her before she left.

“Louis will send you the rest of the way,” she assured her, “and the fireflies will continue to guide your path. They’re always happy to help Tiana, especially after Ray.”

So Kairi napped, and ate a little more, and watched the day slowly pass, occasionally poking at some of the trinkets that littered the space.

“Alright! Kairi, come here.”

She stepped towards Mama Odie, curious, and cried out when her curiosity was rewarded with a sharp rap across the top of her head with Mama Odie’s club. “Ow!!” She whined, blinking gold dust out of her eyes, “Hey, why -?!”

“Oh, you’ve taken harder knocks than that! I gave you a little spell, something to help you – you’ve got a penchant for light magic, girl, so this’ll help you out! And here –”

She shoved a vial into Kairi’s hand, and she looked down, expecting a Potion or Elixir of some kind, only to see it was filled with gumbo.

“…More food?”

“It’s Tiana’s recipe. That’ll fix you up better than what some healing hoo-dad ever could! Now, last thing –”

Mama Odie pulled off one of her jingling golden bracelets, and gently grabbed Kairi’s hand to slip it onto her wrist. “This is going to protect you,” she promised, patting her hand, “give you a little extra oomph to magic and make sure you don’t get bit again!”

A prickle started up behind Kairi’s eyes, and she sniffled a little, curling her fingers around Mama Odie’s and giving her hand a squeeze. “Thank you,” she said softly, “for all your help. I was really scared – I wouldn’t have made it, without you.”

“Aww, now, you’re a tough girl, Kairi – it’ll take a lot more than that to knock you down.” She squeezed Kairi back, “go – be safe, now. Bring Tiana back here, once that remnant has been taken care of.”

“I will!” She nodded, determined, and turned to look at Naveen, who was staring out into the bayou, arms crossed. “Naveen,” she called out, and he turned to look at her, eyes shadowed, “I’ll see you in a bit,” she swore, “and I’ll have Tiana with me.”

The tense line of his shoulders dropped a little, and Naveen gave Kairi a small, tired, smile, “I’ll be
“Thank you, Kairi.”
And with that, she was sent off.

“She heard Mama Odie holler as she descended the stairs, “you take Kairi safely over to Tiana, you hear me! Follow the fireflies!”

“Yes, Mama Odie!” A voice called back, and Kairi stumbled to a stop at the bottom of the stairs when she saw the *ridiculously large* alligator waiting for her. It gave her a big, toothy grin, “hi there! I’m Louis!”

“He, Kairi said faintly, “I’m Kairi. Nice to meet you.”

And so they went, Kairi resuming following the fireflies Tiana was using to light the way, riding on the back of her alligator chauffeur.

*This isn’t the weirdest thing that’s happened, I guess,* Kairi conceded to herself as they traveled, brushing another curtain of moss aside.

The sun was slowly beginning to set, the water lit up to look a fiery orange, the sky slowly bleeding red as the sun sank in the sky. Kairi refused to see something like that as an omen, but her gut twisted with nerves regardless.

Tiana’s light got brighter and brighter the closer they got, and when she was close enough that Kairi felt like she could reach out and touch her, Louis stopped. “I’m dropping you off here,” he said, leading her to a dry, mossy spot near a tree, “I’ll – I’ll wait for the two of you when you get Tiana back but –”

He looked guilty, afraid, and Kairi rushed to assure him, “no, it’s alright – I understand.” She smiled reassuringly, “I’ll be back soon.”

“Be careful!” Louis called out, and Kairi nodded sharply as she set off on foot.

There was plenty solid ground to walk on, and Kairi was grateful for it as she moved, happy to not have to wade through the mud and water the way she did when she arrived. She barely needed the help of the fireflies anymore to guide her, senses attuned to Tiana’s bright light and the shimmer of magic in the air that increased the closer she got. The metallic rotten taste of darkness hit the back of her tongue, and Kairi frowned, flexing her fingers and summoning Destiny’s Embrace into her hand.

After a few steps, she saw her.

Tiana was sitting in a clearing, drenched with the remnants of orange light from the sunset, cypress trees draped with moss surrounding the area.

She was sitting on a small outcropping in the middle of the water that was covered in moss and flowers, hands pressed against her heart as she closed her eyes, brows furrowed in intense focus. She was wearing a green gown that reminded Kairi of the lily pads she’s seen throughout the swamp, and she *glowed* with light, lit up from within by a radiant golden aura.

Behind her, something large slithered around, and Kairi’s attention snapped to that, eyes widening
at what she saw.

A large Chimera prowled back and forth in the enclosed space, at least three stories tall, its long black tail ending in a snake that was hissing and spitting in outrage. Its face looked like a mask of some sort, deep, blood red lines arcing across its face and around its glowing red eyes.

It didn’t look fully corporeal, smoky black and purple scales blending into the rough hide of an alligator, lifting one stubby, clawed foot to strike at the golden barrier that kept it enclosed. It pried its mouth open, showing four long, sharp fangs, dripping with venom, and howled, thrashing in its fury, and Kairi was able to see the insignia on its chest, sickly purple.

A Nightmare.

Kairi had no idea how she would be able to defeat such a Nightmare on her own, but looking at Tiana, visibly exhausted but keeping this monster trapped, she steeled her resolve.

*Sora did it, she reminded herself, and Riku, too. If they can do this, so can I!*

“Tiana!” she called out, stepped into the clearing, “I’m here!”

Her eyes snapped open at Kairi’s voice, and her mouth dropped open a little, brown eyes sparkling with hope, “Kairi?”

“Yeah!” She smiled, “It’s me, I’m here. You can let go now, I’ve got this.”

Just then, the Chimera slammed into the barrier, shrieking and hissing, and Tiana cringed, looking at her hesitantly. “I….I don’t know if I can do that. It’s so strong, I can’t –”

Frowning, Kairi took a running leap and jumped to where Tiana was sitting. She blinked up at her with wide eyes, and Kairi kneeled to face her, laying her Keyblade down to clasp her hands over Tiana’s. “You’ve gotta trust me,” she said firmly, “you’ve been holding this thing back on your own for so long! You don’t deserve to be trapped here, fighting alone. I’m here.” She squeezed their joined hands, “I’m going to fight with you, and we’re going to destroy this remnant of the Shadow Man, and you can go home, and he’ll never haunt you or your world again, not *ever*.”

Tiana’s face crumpled a little, and she closed her eyes, letting out a shaky breath. When she opened her eyes again to look at Kairi, they were lit up with a fierce determination, and she clenched her jaw, nodding sharply.

“I’ll move the barrier and stay in here with you.” Tiana stated firmly, “I’ll fight with you, however I can.”

Kairi’s breath left her in a whoosh, and she nodded back, grabbing her Keyblade and hopping to her feet. “You ready?” She asked her Dream Eater, running a quick hand down its back, and it growled, eyes locked on the Chimera waiting for them. “Okay. Okay. Let’s do this.”

*I can do this.*

She gripped her Keyblade tightly as she fell back into a ready stance, and she tried to calm her racing heart as Tiana closed her eyes and focused, the glow beneath her skin increasing as the golden barrier stretched out and away, keeping them with the Chimera and ensuring safety for everyone else.
Towering over them, it roared, and its burning eyes focused on Kairi. Crouching low, Kairi bared her teeth at it in a fierce smile, “now you’re trapped in here with us,” she hissed. Her dragon screamed, wings flapping, and it took off to strike at the beast’s eyes as its tail struck out at Kairi, ready to bite.

*I can do this!!*

And she leaped.

She has fought so much in the last year, since the Keyblade War; spending days with Riku, traveling across worlds and taking out whatever remaining Heartless and Nobodies remained. Kairi thought she was as prepared as she could be, ready to face whatever would be waiting for her in the Sleeping Realms in her search for Sora.

Kairi was not prepared for the Nightmares.

It was *fast* – Kairi had to mostly rely on distance attacks, shooting spells at it whenever she could before it rushed her, using its thick, whip – like tail to try and trip her up enough to snap her into its jaws, fangs drenched in that black, dripping poison.

She needed to get rid of the tail before she can focus on fully taking it out – she couldn’t let it knock her down, and if she was bitten again, there’s no way she and Tiana would be able to make it out of here.

“Kairi, keep moving!!” Tiana cried out, “the shadows, it – it feeds off of it, uses them to make it stronger, you need to –”

The sun had fully set as Kairi fought, dodging and evading the Chimera’s attacks, and shadows stretched across the area. The light beneath Tiana’s skin brightened, and the light became blinding as she increased the brightness of the barrier, eliminating the shadows. She was fast, but not fast enough, as a snake darted out at her from the darkness, wreathed in shadow and fangs bared.

Kairi jerked back with a cry, swiping it away from her with her Keyblade, and it dissolved with a wisp of darkness.

Above her, her dragon swooped overhead, unleashing a plume of dragon’s breath at the Chimera’s back, taking a few swipes at the large snake at the end of its tail as it snapped up, hissing.

“If its tail!!” Kairi called out to it, “take out the tail, quickly, we can take it out th –”

Glowing eyes filled her vision as the beast rushed her, and she brought her Keyblade up as it caught her in the chest and slammed her to the ground, pinning her. The blade was caught in its jaws as it snapped at her, eyes wild, growling so loud and deep that Kairi could feel it vibrating in her ribs.

Kairi strained against it with all her strength, pushing it back, heart beating at a rabbit pace in her chest. She’s trying so hard not to panic, but she can feel it, wailing in her ears like a siren; adrenaline hyper tuned her senses, and she could smell the darkness coming off of it in waves, horribly rotten, and feel the wave of heat wash over her from the Nightmare’s breath, its chest beginning to glow red hot as it inhaled deeply.
Wide eyed, she stared at the building flames behind its jaws in disbelief and panicked, casting a spell even though her Keyblade was still locked in its teeth. “Freeze!!” She shrieked, shooting a terrified Blizzaga down its throat.

The flames were rapidly extinguished, and the Chimera choked and coughed, throat iced over, giving Kairi a chance to put some space between them. She yanked her frost covered Keyblade out of its mouth and scrambled back, striking it across the face as she retreated.

A loud crack echoed in the air, and she watched as thin, spiderweb fissures spread across its mask-like face, a few chips tumbling to the ground and dissolving into shadows.

Growling, it rushed at her again, too fast, and Kairi quickly rolled out of the way, letting it slam into the barrier. Rough, scaly hide began to burn away with a hiss at the contact with the pure light, and it screamed, inhuman, the sound only increasing to a bone rattling pitch as a horrible ripping noise filled the air.

Her Dream Eater was flying towards her triumphantly, the severed tail of the Chimera clutched in its claws, the snake’s jaws hanging open limply at an unnatural angle.

Once again, its chest began to glow as it screamed, a violent, scorching red, and with a bellow, it released a large plume of flame, a wall of heat heading directly towards Kairi. Throwing up a Reflect spell, she winced at the blistering heat, crimson flames rolling around her and blinding her. Sweat dripped off her chin, and her arms shook as she held onto the spell; her magic was beginning to hit dangerously low levels, and she wasn’t sure how many spells she had left in her to take this Nightmare out.

The barrier dropped, and Kairi’s world blurred as she was snatched around the middle and thrown into the air, flipping once, twice, before getting snapped up in the Chimera’s jaws.

Its fangs ground together, trying to crush her, and Kairi screamed, the poison in its mouth dripping onto her skin, burning like acid.

Kairi had been terrified the moment she tumbled into this unknown world, alone, and the fear rose up in her now like bile, choking her. How could she do this? How on earth did she get it into her head that she would be able to take on a challenge like this alone?? She was still a novice, barely strong enough to even fathom this attempt at Mastery – how on earth did she think she could do this??

Jaws clenched around her again, trying to pierce through her, scraping against her enchanted clothing, and she cried out, terrified, futilely attempting to squirm out of its jaws. Traitorous tears slid to her temples, and Kairi grit her teeth, rapid breaths puffing out through her nose at the poison burning away at her skin. I was a fool for even thinking I could do this, she thought bitterly, I’m not strong enough to do this alone, I –

“-ri!!!! Kairi!!! No!!!”

Tiana’s voice snapped her out of it, and she jerked her head to see Tiana pushing herself to her feet, the barrier around them beginning to flicker.

Right. That’s right.
I’m not by myself, Kairi fiercely reminded herself, Tiana’s here!! She’s fighting with me, keeping everyone safe!!

A warmth circling her wrist caught her attention, and out of the corner of her eye Kairi saw the soft glow emanating from the bracelet Mama Odie gave her, promising her protection. How could she lose her way so quickly? So many people fighting with her, helping her – she must never lose sight of that again.

“Tiana!!” She screamed, voice shaky, “it’s okay!!! Don’t let that barrier down – we’re not going to let this monster escape!! We can’t!!!”

I will do this, Kairi hissed to herself, flipping her Keyblade around into a reverse grip, I will!!!

And with a scream, she plunged the blade deep into the Chimera’s right eye.

It howled, a horrible sound, and Kairi slipped out from its jaws and tumbled to the ground in a heap, winded. Her ribs screamed at her, and she groaned, wrapping a shaking arm around her torso as the Chimera towered over her, yowling as it tried to claw out the Keyblade that was still jammed in its glowing eye, more of its face beginning to crumble away.

“Kairi!!” Tiana darted over to her, grabbing her by the arm and yanking her away from the Nightmare. Kairi hissed as Tiana put pressure on one of the acid burns that littered her arms, and she apologized in a rush. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” She gave Tiana a wobbly, encouraging smile, turning to quickly call her Dream Eater back to her. It landed on her shoulder in a flutter of wings, still puffed up in aggression, eyes locked on the Nightmare.

“Kairi,” Tiana said in a rush, “I have an idea. You know magic, right? Light magic?”

“Yeah. I don’t…know how much magic I have left in me, though.”

“Do you think you have enough for one more spell?”

“I…” Kairi felt like she was ready to drop, legs shaking, one arm still wrapped around her tender ribs, “I don’t –”

Tiana quickly grabbed her free hand, enveloping it in both of hers with a determined squeeze.

“Kairi,” she said firmly, “trust me. We can do this.”

“…Okay. Together. Let’s do it.” She flicked her wrist, and her Keyblade returned to her hand, “I know one really good light spell. We’re going all out, okay?”

“Right!” Tiana nodded, fierce, “we’re gonna end this!!”

The barrier surrounding them flared up, and Tiana clasped her hands to her heart, looking skyward, “Ray!!” she called out.

Above them, clouds parted, and two stars shined in the sky, brighter than all the others. One of the stars flickered, and a white glittering light streaked towards them. As the light got closer and closer, Kairi was able to see that it was made of hundreds of fireflies, extraordinarily bright.

They streaked down to earth, surrounding them, and Kairi was almost blinded at how brightly they
shone, like stars fallen to earth, the heat coming off of them nothing like anything she’s ever felt.

Recovering, the Chimera howled at them, chest glowing once again as it prepared another gust of flame, making one last lunge at them, determined to get the both of them in its jaws once and for all.

“Kairi!” Tiana urged, and she looked radiant, lit up in fiery gold and surrounded by stars, “whatever you’re gonna do, you’ve gotta do it now!! Ray and I, we’ll cover you!!”

“I got it!!” Kairi looked down at her dragon, still perched on her shoulder, “ready?”

It screeched, stretching out its wings, and Kairi gripped her Keyblade tight in both hands.

“Let’s go!!!!” She screamed, and sprinted at the Chimera, ready to collide. They met in the middle of their makeshift arena, and Kairi used the rocky outcropping she found Tiana on to give herself a boost in the air, hollering in triumph at the sound of her Keyblade connecting. Using the momentum, she swung again, skidding to the ground for a moment as more of the Chimera’s face cracked away, revealing more and more of it’s glowing, blood red skin.

Crouching low, Kairi jumped at it again, and with a twirl and a flourish of glowing petals, she struck out with a combination of blows that sent it backwards, claws scraping against the ground.

“Now!!” Kairi’s throat ached at how loudly she screamed, and she felt the heat of the fireflies at her back as she cast her spell, gathering all the light that was in her.

You’ve got a penchant for light magic, girl, so this will help you out!!

*Here we go, Mama Odie!!!* She thought desperately, raising Destiny’s Embrace above her head as she began to glow. The light was white hot - blinding, and Kairi felt her feet leave the ground as she hovered, closing her eyes in focus. The fireflies began to swirl around her, blurring into streaks of flame, and Kairi could feel Tiana’s light with her, too – golden, iridescent, and steeled with determination.

Kairi opened her eyes, looking up at the sky, and murmured a word:

“Light.”

The area exploded.

Light, all consuming, filled the space, a circle of shimmering pillars towering over them, spinning rapidly as they expanded outward, the ground shaking at their movement. A high, painful scream tore through the air, louder and louder, and Kairi squeezed her eyes shut, clenching her jaw as she put all the light she had into the spell.

The screams choked off, faded, and Kairi felt her legs give out as soon as her feet touched the ground, chest heaving as though she’d run for miles and miles. As she blinked the spots out of her eyes, Kairi slowly noticed a few things.

She noticed Tiana’s hand on her back, warm, shaking, Tiana looking just as winded as she felt. She noticed the absence of the fireflies, the only evidence left that proved they were there being the trails of glittering stardust drifting around them.
She noticed the Chimera slumped over on the opposite end of the space, unmoving, half of its body ripped away by the Faith spell, whatever remaining parts slowly melting into shadows. Its glowing eyes were dimmed, and only a corner of the mask that contained its face remained.

Tiana didn’t relax until it completely disappeared, and even then, the barrier remained, held strong by her disbelief.

“Tiana,” Kairi said hoarsely, “Tiana, it’s gone. We’re safe now. You’re safe now.”

She trembled with doubt, unable to believe that the Nightmare she’d been fighting for so long was finally *over*, but slowly, ever so slowly, the golden barrier quietly flickered out.

“We did it,” Tiana murmured numbly, “we really did it.”

“We did.” Kairi smiled, and though she was so tired, she *glowed* with happiness, “you did it, Tiana. We’re gonna get you home.”

Tears rapidly welled up in Tiana’s eyes, and she laughed shakily as they poured down her cheeks, launching herself at Kairi and wrapping her up in a tight hug.

“Kairi,” she sobbed, “thank you!! Thank you so much!!”

A few tears slipped down her cheeks as well, and Kairi beamed as she hugged Tiana back just as tightly.

-O-

Kairi finally used the bottle of gumbo Mama Odie gave her as they slowly returned to her boat, Louis playing music for them at Tiana’s request as they made their way back.

Though it was in her pack for quite some time, the gumbo was still piping hot, as though it was fresh off the fire. Kairi slowly sipped at it as they traveled, and the more she ate, the better she felt, aches slowly fading away. By the time they made it to Mama Odie’s boat, Kairi felt completely recovered, albeit a little bruised.

She helped Tiana onto land, and the two of them slowly made their way up the winding steps around the tree and into Mama Odie’s boat.

“ Took you long enough!” Mama Odie crowed as Naveen rushed forward, eyes wild as he scooped Tiana up into a tight embrace. Tiana wound her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder, and the two of them rocked in place, pressed as close as possible as Naveen whispered her name over and over, pressing kisses into her hair.

“Kairi,” he turned towards her, his voice thick with tears, “Kairi, I – thank you so much, how can I ever repay you, I –”

She smiled, “it’s fine,” she said softly, “just – take her home. That’s all. It’s the least I could do.”

“Kairi.” Tiana reached out for her, and she stepped forward to grab her hand, “thank you – for everything. I’ll never forget it.” She gave her a watery smile, “if you’re ever in the area again, stop by Tiana’s Palace, won’t you? I can treat you to some real home cooking, then.”
She beamed, giving Tiana’s hand a squeeze, “it’s a promise! We’ll see each other again, I know it.”

Tiana nodded, and Naveen thanked her profusely one last time before he escorted Tiana from the boat to take her back to town.

“What I tell you?” Mama Odie gently rapped her on the head again with her palm, “you’re a tough girl, Kairi. I knew you could do it.”

Rubbing her head, Kairi stared down at her feet, frowning. “…I was really scared.” She finally admitted, “I thought I wasn’t going to be strong enough.”

“It’s good and fine, being scared. You powered through it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I had Tiana with me. And you.”

Mama Odie grinned at her, wrinkles creasing deeply, “good girl. You find what you were looking for, out there?”

“I –”

Kairi was cut off by the clink of bottles as Juju slithered between them, winding around Mama Odie’s feet, and Kairi took a step back just as a stray bottle bumped into her heel.

She looked down, making sure to take care to not step on any of Mama Odie’s trinkets, and froze when she got a good look at the bottle that hit her foot, her heart skipping a beat.

It was a skinny bottle, corked closed, the dusky blue glass streaked with dried flakes of salt; inside the bottle, Kairi was able to see a rolled-up piece of brown paper, gentle folds creasing the page. Trembling, Kairi crouched down to pick the bottle up, and it felt so warm in her hands – like it had been sitting out in the sun for hours.

Throat suddenly dry, Kairi swallowed heavily, and peeked through the glass to try and get a glimpse of the words inside.

_Thinking of you, wherever you are…_

Kairi couldn’t speak past the lump in her throat, and she held that precious bottle close to her, a film of tears blurring her vision.

“I –” she croaked, amazed tears pouring down her cheeks, “…yes. Yeah, I did. I found it.”

She knew that Mama Odie knew she was crying, she was so obvious, but Mama Odie did nothing but smile, reaching out to pat her hand. “Good girl,” she said in approval, “now, go on! I’m sure we’ll see you again soon enough.”

Kairi nodded, wiping at her eyes, and smiled widely as she put the fragment of Sora’s heart into her pack. “Yes! I’m going!”

Impulsive, she darted forward to wrap Mama Odie up into a hug – she was warm and smelled like spices and fresh earth. “Thank you, Mama Odie.” She said quietly, “for everything.”
When she finally left the boat, Tiana and Naveen were gone, Louis escorting them back to the city, and Kairi stood alone, staring up at the starry sky peeking through the canopy of the bayou.

“Thanks,” Kairi murmured quietly to the stars, and in a flash of light, the Sleeping Keyhole appeared, hovering above Mama Odie’s boat.

In a flash, Destiny’s Embrace appeared in her hand, and Kairi pointed it at the keyhole with a smile. “Ready for the next one?” She asked her Dream Eater, and it chirped in her ear, nuzzling her cheek. “Alright. Let’s go!”

*May my heart be my guiding key.*

Closing her eyes, she focused as a beam of light shot out towards the keyhole, feeling out for another fragment of Sora’s light. The last thing she heard was the echoing click of the keyhole before everything went dark, and she was falling, falling, falling, deeply asleep.

-o-

*Keychain Received: Evangeline*

Chapter End Notes

yerrrrrr we DID IT. one world down, a good handful to go!!!

of COURSE I had to do a princess and the frog world, like how the fuck could I NOT. IT’S WHAT WE DESERVE. IT WOULD BE SO COOL. I hope the faciller nightmare description made enough sense because it looks so scary in my head and it was a lot better than my first draft of the nightmare.

hopefully the boss battle came out alright, lmao. lord knows I tried! if you follow me on tumblr you've probably seen my whining about writing fight scenes.

I did so much reading on how a Princess of Heart's powers work and what I basically got from it was like 'oh ok so they're basically like princess zelda but they don't get to be as cool'. I do hope kairi gets a chance to actually explore her powers more in game, ho-hum.

I think that's all I wanna say, hmm....world two's overview has been written up, so I'll try and get on that asap! I was going to try and be Super Cool and give y'all a double update but writing this took me out lmao. combat is so hard!!!

alright, done blabbering now. comments and kudos are appreciated, as always. see you next time!
Kairi awoke to cool wind caressing her face and warm fingers trailing across her back.

Wrinkling her nose, she slowly shoved herself up onto her elbows, fingers curling into fists, and as she blinked the sleep out of her eyes, the feeling of a hand on her back slowly faded away. Pushing herself up, Kairi sat back on her heels as she rubbed at her eye, using her free hand to check and make sure her Dream Eater was still there. It was still wrapped around her shoulders, humming under her touch, and her shoulders relaxed a little.

She wondered if it was a dream, that hand on her back, but she could still feel the warmth of the touch sinking into her skin, right between her shoulder blades. Kairi shivered a little, making a move to wipe her hands on her jacket, but slowed once she saw that her outfit had changed.

“What on earth?” She murmured, taking in the thick black overalls and faded pink tank beneath, “What – where am I?”

Hopping to her feet, Kairi finally looked around, taking in her surroundings in an attempt get an idea of where she’d ended up.

She’d landed on a large outcropping of stone in a cavern, the curve of the rocks making her feel like she was in a large bowl. There was a large crack in the stone behind her, leading out of the cavern, but it was so dark and shadowed over that Kairi couldn’t see what laid beyond. A few feet away from her there was a bridge – or, something that used to be a bridge; it stopped halfway over the large chasm, a large portion of the wood smashed and, after a few minutes of squinting, burnt.

Kairi wondered what could have been responsible for the destruction and shivered at what her mind conjured up.

Tracing her eyes along the remains of the bridge, Kairi finally saw that she had landed on the
outskirts of what appeared to be a huge, sprawling city. It stretched across the cavern, large jutting stones stretching across a gigantic body of water. The area was obscured by steam, and after scooting forward and peeking over the edge, Kairi discovered that the steam was from the water pouring over the edge and landing in the flowing lava that surrounded the area.

At the edges, on large rock platforms, stood enormous stone statues, looking leagues tall even at the distance Kairi was at, and their arms were outstretched, eyes glowing a bright, vibrant blue. Her eyes wandered up, up, up, high above the tallest building that sat at the heart of the city, and Kairi saw a bright light, the blue glow matching the vibrant eyes of the statues, surrounded by slowly rotating stone plaques that were emitting that same light.

“Wow,” she whispered, taking everything in, “I guess that’s where we’ve got to go, huh?”

But how would she even be able to get there? The bridge has been destroyed, and not even her strongest Aero spell would get her across that gap. Kairi despaired silently for a moment, wondering what she could do, when her eye caught on the blurs of – of ships, zooming back and forth in the air.

Maybe…maybe if she could get their attention, somehow, and flag them down, she could –

“…Kairi?! Kairi!!!”

Kairi’s heart slammed into her throat at the familiar voice that reached her ears, and she whirled around to see Roxas running straight for her out of the large crack of stone, eyes wide. His charmed outfit had changed as well, into a large jacket over a faded beige tank, suspenders clipped onto his dark cargo pants. At his side was a Dream Eater, a crimson lion the size of a large dog, and her Dream Eater chirped at the sight of it, taking off from her shoulder to fly over and begin to playfully dive at it.

She didn’t pay much attention to them, though, letting out a small shriek as she darted towards Roxas, the two of them colliding in the middle in a tight embrace.

“Oh my god!!” Kairi squealed as she was picked up and spun in a tight circle; Roxas still smelled like wherever he landed before this, the familiar scent of sun and ocean. “Roxas!! It’s you!! Where did you go, are you okay?!”

“I should be asking you that!!” Roxas cried out, “I get knocked on my ass by this wave and next thing I know I’m waking up alone on an island in the biggest ocean I have ever seen!!”

Tripping over her words, Kairi excitedly told Roxas of her adventure, of landing alone in the middle of a swamp and saving Tiana from the Nightmare that plagued them. “It was terrifying,” she admitted breathlessly as the two of them stepping back from their embrace, clutching at his hands, “I’ve – I’ve always had Riku with me, you know? Whenever we took care of the Heartless on other worlds. So, it was – I thought I wasn’t going to make it, for a moment. But I did!”

Roxas squeezed her hands with a grin, and Kairi gave him a shake in return, “okay, now you! Tell me where you went!!”

And he did, telling her about landing on an island in the middle of the ocean and helping a young
girl save a goddess whose heart had been stolen away. “Did you know that goddesses had hearts?” Roxas asked in wonder, “I never knew at all – and it wasn’t like any heart I’ve ever seen!” He continued his story, telling her about the girl he helped, Moana, and her demigod companion, Maui.

“Moana was really cool,” he mused, “and she kinda reminded me of you.”

“Me?” Kairi blinked. “How?”

“Well she kinda had all that –” He let go of one of her hands to gesture vaguely in the air, “that light stuff, you know? Her light was as strong as yours is.”

“No way,” Kairi whispered, awed. “Just like me?”

“Mm.”

What on earth were the odds of both of them running into one of the reincarnated Princesses of Heart? How lucky could they be?

“And – and did you find one? A fragment?”

“Ah.” Roxas’ eyes drifted downward, “I…yeah. Yeah, I did. Here, look –”

With his free hand, he reached into his pack at his hip to grab something and showed her what he’d plucked into his hand. Cradled in his palm was a small marble – or maybe a gem? It was a light blue color, almost like Roxas was holding a piece of the sky, and it shimmered a little in the cradle of his hand.

“The ocean gave it to me.” He explained softly.

“Huh?”

“The ocean. In that world, it was – kind of alive? It only really responded to Moana. But – before I left, it just…reared up and dropped this in my hand.”

Roxas’ smile was small, and a little wobbly, as he placed the fragment back into his pack. “Did you find yours?”

“I did –”

Kairi’s voice was drowned out by an alarm beginning to ring out in the distance, bells clanging as the area became alert, some ships heading further in to land while some stayed on the outskirts. High above them, the blue light began to glow, the stone plaques surrounding it beginning to spin, faster and faster and faster, until Kairi could see nothing but a blur of light.

A low rumble emerged from the lava below, so deep that Kairi could feel her bones rattle with it, and she shared a panicked glance with Roxas before the two of them scrambled to the edge of the cliff to see what was happening.

The lava was roiling, bubbles rising to the surface as the head of something large poked out; Kairi couldn’t see what it was, the features obscured by the streams of magma pouring down its face. All she could see were the eyes – large, round, and a fierce red, as bright and burning as the lava it was
submerged in. Those eyes were locked on the city and were full of such malice that it made a shiver race down her spine. Raising its head, it let out a scream, bone-chilling, grating, as multiple forms burst from the lava, heading towards the land.

Boiling magma dripped off the bodies of multiple fish with dark, maroon scales and bright red eyes, sharp teeth bared as they soared through the air. They screeched, and even from the distance, Kairi could make out the sickly purple markings of a Nightmare between the fish’s eyes. Gasping, she elbowed Roxas to get his attention, “Nightmares!” She gasped, “those are Nightmares, Roxas, we’ve gotta do som –”

A crack as loud as thunder echoed across the cavern as the statues that were standing sentry at the edge of the city clapped their hands together as one. Their hands slowly parted, and a crackling netting of blue energy emerged, slowly spreading until a bright blue dome covered the city. The Nightmares that collided with the erected barrier were blasted away with a shriek and a puff of shadows, while the rest made their way to the few ships that stayed outside of the barrier as defense.

They moved quickly, some ships diving to take out the smaller Nightmares while others attempted to shoot at the main threat staring them down from the lava. Jagged lightning blue bolts tore through the air, and a few more Nightmares vanished with a puff of smoke. The hidden beast rumbled again, and more Nightmares burst from the lava, gnashing their sharp teeth.

Kairi couldn’t bear to keep watching the ships fight the Nightmares on their own, and Destiny’s Embrace appeared in her hand. “Let’s help them out!” she declared, looking back at Roxas in time to see his eyes narrow in determination. “We can do something from a distance, at least!!”

Nodding sharply, Roxas flexed his hands, Oathkeeper appearing in one hand and –

“Oblivion?” Kairi’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, “but I thought –”

“Xion’s letting me borrow it,” Roxas explained, raising both of his blades to shoot two Blizzard spells at one of the Nightmares, “to remind me that she’s thinking about me. It’s just – a thing we can do.”

Kairi was ready to make some noise about just how sweet that was, but unfortunately Roxas’ spell was well-targeted, and as one Nightmare vanished, a small horde came at them in retaliation, the magic catching their attention. Fighting always took all of Kairi’s focus, but she allowed herself to get one good bit in, cooing out, “that’s so cute,” as she dodged a boiling stream of water from a Nightmare.

“Oh, shut it,” Roxas snapped, using one Keyblade to block a bite from one Nightmare while striking out at the other, and that was all the talking they could do for now.

Kairi felt a little better about fighting when she knew that Roxas was at her back; when it was just her and her Dream Eater in the bayou, she was so tense and hyper-aware of the shadows, and that feeling only increased after getting ambushed. Here, though she was still sharp, making sure to not get caught unawares, the extra support of Roxas and his Dream Eater set her somewhat at ease.

Two of the ships had landed near them just as Roxas’ Dream Eater took out the last Nightmare, crushing the fish between it’s jaws. One of the people piloting the ships – a man, dark skinned and
broad, long silver hair tied up into a bun – hopped to the ground and approached them. He held a spear in his hand and eyed the two of them with wary blue eyes as he stepped forward.

“Um…” Kairi dispelled her Keyblade with a flash of light, nervously clasping her hands behind her back, “hello. Are you all alright?”

“Outsiders.” The man said, “you can destroy them? Those things? With your weapons?”

“Yes,” Roxas said, dispelling his own Keyblades, “it’s why we’re here. We came from – from the outside. To help.”

Kairi nodded eagerly in agreement, eyes bouncing between the two men before her. Still perched on his ship, the second pilot’s eyes lit up with hope, and the man standing before them relaxed slightly from his tense posture, wariness still tightening his eyes. “Come.” He stepped to the side, gesturing to the ships – large stone fish with glowing blue eyes. “We will take you to the city. To speak with our prince.”

Behind them, another bell rang, signaling the end of the attack, and the bright light above the city dimmed slightly as the force field began to crumble away. Kairi and Roxas shared a glance before agreeing, and they were quickly escorted onto the ships and zooming across the waters into the city. Kairi craned her neck to take in the scenery with awe, eyes wide as she stared at the greenery and intricate carvings etched into the stones.

They landed on a large platform in the middle of the city, and Kairi accepted the helping hand off the ship, still taking everything in. High above them, the bright sphere of light shimmered, pulsing in time – like a heartbeat. “Welcome,” the man said solemnly, “to the city of Atlantis. Come – I will escort you to the throne room.”

-K-

Kairi took in all the activity that surrounded them as she and Roxas were led through Atlantis, eyes dancing curiously among the people who gave her the same searching looks in return. She linked her arm through Roxas’ as whispers reached her ears, shock at seeing outsiders after so many years. Roxas looked just as nervous as she felt at the number of eyes on them, and she gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

Eventually the crowds thinned out, and they were taken to a hall flanked with tall, wide pillars; at the end of the hall were two large stone doors, with two guards standing before it.

“Is he in there?” their escort asked, and one of the guards nodded. “Yes – we brought him here for safety as soon as the alarms sounded. He isn’t happy about it.”

“Of course not.” He gestured over to Kairi and Roxas, who perked up at their inclusion, “I have brought these two to have an audience with him. They are outsiders and say that they have been sent to help with the – the monsters.”

The guards sized the two of them with skeptical eyes. “These children?” The other guard demanded, and Kairi could feel Roxas bristle with indignation at her side, “able to defeat those monsters?”

“I saw it with my own eyes. They need to speak with the prince.”
The guards still threw them dubious glances but complied with the given request, the two of them heading to the handles of the door and pulling the large stone open for them to step through.

They were led into a large, open area, skinny pillars scattered across the room. The space felt lush and comforting, surrounded by green things, ceiling draped with sheer, light fabrics. The room was filled with water, and stepping stones led to a gigantic broken statue that sat in the center of the room, a small seating area tucked beneath the statue.

In that space, a young man draped in a blue tunic was pacing back and forth, agitated, and whipped around to face them as they entered. “Finally!” he cried out, exasperated, “I appreciate the care, but you know you don’t have to lock me away in here, it’s honestly fine, I’d rather –”

His rambling abruptly stopped as he took Kairi and Roxas in, and he blinked, pushing his large spectacles up over his nose. “….Who are you?”

The man’s appearance shocked Kairi, because he was just so unlike all the other people that she had seen in Atlantis – tall, lanky, with floppy brown hair and wide amber eyes; nothing about this man really screamed ‘prince’. And yet –

“Outsiders, I present to you Milo Nedakh, Prince Consort of Atlantis. My prince –” their escort nodded his head in greeting, “I bring these two to you because they say that they have been sent from the outside, to help us with the monsters that have plagued us as of late.”

Milo’s eyes widened at that, and Kairi could see the hope that lit up in them even from the distance. “You can help us? That – that’s incredible, I -! Come in! Thank you for bringing them here, it’s fine! Come here, so we can talk.”

Kairi and Roxas slowly made their way across the stepping stones to Milo as the stone doors scraped closed behind them, and when they made it to him, his eyes bounced between them, fingers tangling together.

“…You’re from the surface world?” He finally asked, “really?”

“Ah…sort of? We were…sent here.”

Milo said nothing, eyes narrowing thoughtfully, and Roxas stepped in, “can you tell us what’s happening here? With the monsters?”

“Oh.” Milo frowned, and worry deeply creased his brow, “I…I’ll need to show you, to explain it all better. Come on.”

He led the two of them back across the stepping stones and knocked on the doors to exit the throne room, despite the protests of the guards. “If these two were sent to handle those monsters, then I’m in the safest place possible. I’ll take care, I swear.”

He led them through the city, taking time to wave and greet the citizens that they passed, back to the large platform where they landed, and pointed up at the light high up in the sky, the plaques back to rotating around it at a sedate pace. “Do you see that? That light, way up there?”

“Yes?”
“That light is my wife.”

Kairi’s eyes snapped back to Milo, and she caught the confused expression on Roxas’ face that matched hers, wondering what he meant by that statement. As though he could feel their confusion, Milo continued. “My wife,” he explained, “is Kidagakash. The Queen of Atlantis. And right now, she is protecting us all.”

He didn’t tear his eyes away from the light as he spoke, and his eyes were horribly sad. “The light,” he continues, “it’s a crystal. It’s kind of like….the life force here. It powers the entire city – it’s what keeps everyone alive. To keep us all safe, it calls on someone with royal blood, to protect the city until the threat has passed. It’s only done this once before, when I met Kida – after I led a group of explorers here, and they tried to steal the crystal away to sell it on the black market.

We stopped them from letting an entire civilization die, and I -I stayed here. With Kida. It’s – it’s been good. For years and years, it’s been good. But then –”

Milo’s face crumpled a little, “one day, Kida – she said she felt something. A darkness, she said. Made her feel sick.”

No way. Kairi whipped her head around to look at Roxas with wide eyes, and he shook his head at her, equally dumbfounded.

“Then the ground – it shook something awful,” Milo goes on, not noticing their shocked reactions, “almost like the volcano was about to blow again. And that thing appeared. The crystal turned red, so red, and – it found Kida. Took her away.” His voice cracked a little at the end, and Kairi placed a hand on his arm to comfort him, heart aching in sympathy.

“She’s been up there for so long,” he moaned, miserable, “she can’t – we have to get rid of those monsters. We have to.”

He finally tore his eyes away from the crystal and looked at the two of them with pleading eyes, wet with tears. “Please,” he begged, “I – please, save my wife. If she stays bonded to the crystal like this, she – she might never come back. I might lose her forever.”

Horror cuts at Kairi’s heart, and she stares up at the light above them, aghast at the thought of the woman up there, chosen to protect her world, never able to return. A hand on her shoulder brings her back to earth, and she looks over at Roxas, who looks extremely shaken. “I swear,” he vowed, voice trembling, “we’ll get rid of it as soon as we can. We’ll bring your wife back, we promise.”

“Don’t worry,” Kairi spoke up, pressing a hand over her heart, “you can count on us! No matter what, we’ll make sure she’ll get set free.”

Relief sags Milo’s shoulders, and he bends forward, gasping. “Thank you,” he whispers, “thank you.”

Milo wasn’t like any prince Kairi has ever met – but, really, she hasn’t met a whole lot of princes, so what would she know?
He just didn’t have any princely air about him – he was a little awkward, but smart and kind, and talked a mile a minute, wildly gesticulating with his hands. He gave them a room to rest and promised them a meal later. “I won’t just throw you two at that thing without a thought!” He cried out, “we’ve got to get a plan together! Think of a way to draw that monster out! That needs a little time!”

So he showed them the ins and outs of Atlantis – the shopping quarters, the docks, bustling with activity, voices calling out to each other as they brought in their wares. The air was still filled with a slight tension, but despite the constant threat lingering outside of Atlantis, the citizens thrived, the air carrying the sounds of children’s laughter.

It was comforting to Kairi, how even though such a large threat hovered around them, their Queen missing, the people were still able to find some joy.

“Milo,” Roxas spoke up as they were led through the docks, watching the water lap up against the stones, “how did you even end up in a place like this?”

“Ah, well…” Milo sheepishly ran a hand through his hair, “see, I was a linguist. I love language, and history, and all my life I was told stories about Atlantis, and I just – I just wanted to find something. And I got this – this miracle, an expedition funded by a friend of my late grandfather and we – I was expecting ruins. Remains, you know? I didn’t expect to find a whole civilization, still thriving.”

His eyes glittered as he spoke, remembering, “that was how I met Kida, and her father, and learned how they got here, and – and how…”

Milo’s enthusiasm dimmed a little, and he looked down at his feet, silent. “I mentioned before, how – how Atlantis almost died, because their life source almost got taken. It was…my fault, sort of.”

“Milo –” Kairi began to say, but he raised a hand, lips pursed. “No, no. It -it is true. I didn’t really know their true intent, but – I brought them here. They lost their king, and Atlantis almost died out.”

“But you fixed it, didn’t you?” Roxas asked, “you made it right. Atlantis isn’t dead. And I guess people have forgiven you for it, Prince Consort.”

He said the title with a teasing smile, and a splotchy blush broke across Milo’s face as he sputtered, “well, that’s – I just, I mean, it’s -!”

Kairi and Roxas snickered at his reaction and Milo pushed them onward, face still furiously red. “I have something I need to show you two anyway, so -! Come on!”

Roxas’ eyebrows quirked upward, and Kairi wondered what else there was for them to see.

He led them back to the main platform in the city, and Kairi frowned, confused, as Milo turned to them, placing a hand on one of the large, fish shaped ships. “The ships?” she asked, “Milo, we’ve already seen those.”

“I know.” Grinning, Milo reached into a pocket in his tunic and pulled out two shining necklaces, similar to the one around his neck, “I’m going to teach you two how to pilot them.”
“What?” Roxas gasped, as Kairi’s eyes went wide, “when did you get those?”

“I asked a guard to bring these to me while we were walking,” Milo explained as he placed the necklaces around their necks. “This crystal – it’s important. It’s part of the light, up there; it keeps the city alive, and gives these ships their power.”

Kairi looked down at her necklace, transfixed at the light inside the stone; it shimmered and flickered in time with the light above them, and felt warm against her fingertips when she touched it.

“How come you want to teach us how to pilot these things?” She asked absently, still admiring the shine of her crystal.

“Because it’s the only way to reach that thing.”

That brought her back to earth, and Kairi focused back on Milo. “The only way?”

“Have you ever seen it?” Roxas asked, “whatever’s in the lava?”

“No.” Milo frowned, “it’s never tried to come out. It destroyed the bridge, when it came, but – but mostly it just sends those other things, the little ones. All we see are the eyes. It’s…the feeling of them…it reminds me of someone.”

“Oh? Who?”

“Rourke.”

At their confused squinting, Milo explained, “he was one of the people in my expedition group; he’d planned on taking the crystal away for money. I -I stopped him you know, but –” He bites his lip, “Kida says that energy has a way of sticking around – the good and the bad. If the previous kings can stay with Atlantis, then maybe…maybe - I’m not sure.”

Kairi’s skin prickled some in uneasiness, and she looked out across the water to the edge of Atlantis, to the thick steam rising into the air. She wondered about the lava, and whatever was waiting for them beneath it, and she felt uneasy.

“Hey, Milo?” She turned away from what was waiting for them at the edge of Atlantis, “the ships? I think I’m ready to learn how to fly. Can you show us?”

Milo perked up at the reminder of his task, and thoughts of the Nightmare hidden beneath the lava were put away, for now.

-o-

It took a few hours for Kairi to get the hang of piloting the ship – the ketak, Milo had said. She didn’t feel as horrible about how long it took to properly pilot the strange ship when Roxas was right there suffering along with her.

Turning the ship on was easy, at least; the crystal was basically the key to start the whole thing up. No, moving it was the problem; she kept going so fast, or moved in stuttering, jerky starts. Kairi
was almost ready to throw her hands up and call it quits an hour in, but Milo reassured her. “It’s fine,” he’d said, “Kida and I didn’t know how to pilot the ketaks when we first saw them. She made it go flying all over the place, the first time we tried – we were lucky we didn’t break anything.”

So she kept trying. It didn’t hurt that Milo was a good teacher; he was ridiculously patient, encouraging them when they got frustrated and hopping onto the ketak himself to give them a demonstration to help them understand something. By the time dinner time came around, Milo was standing with a wide smile as Kairi and Roxas carefully zipped around in the air.

She couldn’t help but smile, enjoying the cool wind as it brushed through her hair; once she got the hang of it, flying the ketak was actually really fun!!

“Roxas!” She called out, “let’s do a little race! First one back to the platform gets ice cream, and the loser has to buy it!”

Grinning, wide and mischievous, Kairi raced into the trees before Roxas could gather his bearings and laughed loudly at the cry of outrage he let out before giving chase. She lost sight of Roxas eventually, the two of them spinning around each other through the brush before heading in different directions. She hopped over the fishing docks before making her way back to the platform, zipping around trees and stone ruins, confident that she was going to enjoy a nice ice cream treat after the exam.

A splash of yellow in the trees caught her eye.

It was a familiar yellow, horribly so, and it made Kairi slow down, her ketak touching down onto the ground with a soft ‘tap’. Squinting at that splotch of yellow, hidden by leaves, Kairi hopped off her ship and took a few curious steps forward.

The faint brush across her senses made her freeze, stuttering to a halt as her breath caught in her throat. All thoughts about the race left her mind as she stumbled into the trees, taking care to not lose sight of that splash of yellow.

She had to find it. She had to – there.

There, up in one of the trees, was a paopu fruit.

A lump grew in her throat the instant Kairi set her eyes on it, and even though her vision was blurred by tears, she wouldn’t look away. She was desperate to get to it, and made short work of accomplishing that, scrambling up the tree as fast as she could. Kairi could never beat her boys at running races, no matter how hard she tried or cheated, but at climbing, they could never beat her.

There were a few scrapes on her palms, but it was easy to ignore once she sat on the branch of the tree and picked up the paopu fruit with shaky hands. It was warm, just as warm as the first fragment, and fluttered under her hands with a faint pulse.

*Kairi, I’ll keep you safe.*
Mm-mm. Let me keep you safe.

She was crying in earnest now, cradling that dear piece of Sora’s heart close to her chest. I’ll keep you safe, she swore, feeling that faint pulse fall in time with her own, I’ll keep every piece of you safe, and then I’ll bring you home.

Kairi let herself have a few minutes to cry before tucking the paopu fruit into her pack and shimmying down the tree to her ship. Sniffling, she started her ketak back up and shakily floated into the air before slowly making her way back to the main platform.

Roxas was waiting there for her with Milo when she landed, and his triumphant expression melted into shock when he saw her tear streaked face and puffy eyes.

“Kairi?!” Once she landed her ship, he rushed to her side, alarmed. “Are you okay?! Did something happen to you?!”

His hands hovered over her, and he looked helpless, like he wasn’t sure what to do to stop her tears. Kairi gave him a wobbly smile and took his hands, “it’s fine. They’re happy tears, I promise.”

“Happy? Why –” His eyes widened, and Kairi’s grin widened as a few more tears escaped her. “You found him?” He whispered, “Another one? Where?”

“In the trees. It was a paopu fruit, Roxas.” She laughed wetly, “I’d recognize that anywhere.”

“Kairi?” Milo had reached them, and he was alarmed when he saw her tears, “are you okay?! Did anything happen?! You didn’t get hurt out there, did you, is everything -?”

“Milo,” Kairi smiled, “I’m okay. I’m okay. I swear. They’re happy tears. I found something – something really important to me.”

“Oh.” His shoulders sagged as he let out a huge sigh of relief, “I was so worried something happened to you.”

“Thank you for caring. I’m alright, though, I promise!”

“If you’re sure. Alright, you two, come on – it’s late, and I promised you food. And then I’ll let you two rest. Tomorrow morning we’ll get a plan together on taking out that thing.”

Roxas helped her off the ketak, making sure to stick close as they followed Milo to their room. Kairi’s heart swelled with warmth, and she gave Roxas another reassuring smile as they walked. We’re getting closer, she reassured herself, we must be. We’re so close to bringing him home, I know it.

=o-

“Hey, Roxas?”
Kairi didn’t really know if he was even awake; the room they were given was dark, the only light they had coming from the dim glow of the small lanterns full of pyreflies that Milo had left them. Near the lanterns she could make out the shapes of their Dream Eaters, her dragon curled up in Roxas’ lion’s fluffy mane, resting.

Sighing quietly, she squeezed at her pillow and tried again, “are you awake?”

“…Yeah.” A rustling of movement as Roxas rolled around to face her, “what’s up?”

“I’m just…” Kairi felt ridiculous for feeling this way, biting the inside of her cheek, “I’m a little nervous, I guess, and I was wondering – were you, y’know, when you were by yourself – were you scared?”

He didn’t say anything for a while, and Kairi shoved her cheek into her pillow, face beginning to burn in embarrassment. “I was just wondering because, y’know, I already told you about how scared I was, so I guess – like, I know you’ve been doing this for a lot longer than I have and stuff, but I still wondered –”

“Yes.” More rustling as Roxas adjusted, and Kairi could see the outline of him in the faint light, his face turned towards hers. “Yes, I was scared.”

“Really?”

“Of course!”

Roxas sighed, “The goddess – Te Fiti, that’s who she was – when she got her heart taken away, she turned into something…terrifying. As a Nightmare, she was already intimidating – I couldn’t imagine having to fight a Heartless that used to be a goddess. I think that was how the world fell to darkness – they couldn’t return Te Fiti’s heart in time, and the world was consumed.”

He fell silent, lost in thought, and Kairi shifted under her blankets, waiting. “I have done this for a long time,” he finally said, “I was sent on a lot of missions when I was in the Organization – assignments to take out Heartless to restore Kingdom Hearts. But still – it never really stops being scary.”

“Never?”

“Not ever. It’s fine to be scared, Kairi, you know? It’s normal.”

“Mm. I know. I still just – I don’t –” she huffed, frustrated, “I just – still don’t feel like I’m really good enough for this, I guess.”

“Kairi don’t be dumb.” Roxas yawned, “you’re really strong already, and you’re better at magic than I am. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“But –”

“We both weren’t entirely ready for this.” He cuts her off. “But we’re here. Sora needs us. So we’ve gotta do our best to get him home. Okay?”

“…Yeah. Okay.”
She heard Roxas blindly reach out, patting around and jumped a little when he found her hand, squeezing it. “It’s okay, Kairi. We can do this. Together or apart. We’re plenty strong.”

“Mmhm.” Smiling, Kairi squeezed his hand in return, “thanks Roxas. I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“It’s okay. Go to sleep.”

Kairi nodded, comforted, and eventually, they fell asleep, hands still connected.

-o-

She isn’t sure how long they got to sleep, but it was still dark when they heard the loud ringing of alarm bells start up, Milo bursting into their room.

“Kairi! Roxas! You’ve gotta get up, you’ve got to go now.”

“Huh?” Kairi slurred, shooting into an upright position as Roxas awoke with a start, “what? Milo, what’s ha –”

“That monster,” he said in a rush, “it’s coming – it’s coming out. You need to get out of here, before the barrier closes.”

That woke Kairi up, and she shared a panicked look with Roxas before scrambling to her feet, the two of them rushing to collect their Dream Eaters before darting out of the room. Her heart was pounding in her ears, and already she felt shaky; she didn’t feel ready to fight this Nightmare at all. She still didn’t know what to expect, didn’t know the full scope of the monster that was rising from the lava.

They burst through the doors to the outside, sprinting for the platform to get to their ships, and above them, Kairi could see the bright light increasing as Kida began to activate the barrier once more to protect the people inside. Concerned, frantic voices and children’s cries hit Kairi’s ears as they ran, and her eyes darted to Roxas at her side. Though he looked as pale as she felt, his eyes had hardened in determination once he heard the Atlantean’s terrified voices, and when his eyes found Kairi’s, he gave her a sharp nod.

The large platform came into view just as the loud thunderclap of the guardians creating the barrier echoed across the waters, and Kairi scrambled for her ketak, hopping on quickly.

“You remember how to turn it on?” Milo asked rapidly, “and how to shoot, and fly, and - everything?”

“Yes!” The force field was beginning to appear, crackling blue light appearing between the guardians’ large hands, “Milo, we have to go!”

“Don’t worry about us!” Roxas started up his ketak, “We’ve got this! Everything’s gonna be okay!”

“After this, Kida will be back.” Kairi smiled. “It’ll be fine. Okay?”

Milo looked stricken, face pale as his eyes darted between the two of them, “…okay.” He finally
croaked. “Please - be careful.”

They grinned, and after Kairi started up her ketak, the two of them sped off, racing out of the city with a few other ships just as the barrier closed and a large claw appeared from the edge of the city, dripping in lava and scraping against the barrier.

The barrier hissed and spit at its touch, but the Nightmare paid it no mind, digging in its claws and heaving itself up, over and over, until it perched on top of the barrier, high above Atlantis. Rivulets of lava ran down the sides, and further below, more smaller Nightmares emerged from the lava as the larger Nightmare threw its head back and roared, the sound akin to breaking glass.

The other ships dived to take care of the smaller Nightmares, and Kairi’s heart raced as she took in the bigger threat, the remaining lava sliding away to show its full form.

A Leviathan sat at the top of the crackling barrier, its large, crustacean-like body curling and twitching, spindly legs scrambling for purchase. Instead of shell, the Leviathan looked like it was entirely made of crystal, large, jagged cracks spreading across its form and showing a burning, fiery red. Its body melded into a bald, domed head, taken up mostly by its burning red eyes and large, stretched grin, showing rows of sharp teeth, and it dug a set of its forelimbs – large hands, ending in sharp claws – into the barrier, while it snapped a pair of large claws at the crystal, obscured by the force field.

Staring at that light, its eyes burned with a hate so fierce it made Kairi’s stomach clench, and it threw its head back to let out another crackling scream.

“How are we gonna do this?!” Kairi yelled over its screams, her ears ringing at the noise, and Roxas shook his head. “We’ve got to get it off the barrier!” he called back, “and keep it away from Kida! You remember how to shoot?”

“Yeah!”

“Then let’s go!!”

The Nightmare began to slam at the barrier with its large claws, trying to break it, energy sparking around it like lightning, and the two of them dived, speeding off in opposite directions of the Nightmare to attack it on both sides. Far below them, jagged blue arcs of energy shot across the air like lightning as the Atlanteans took out the smaller Nightmares, and Kairi took a deep breath before slamming her hand on the control pad of her ketak and sending out a shot of her own.

The beam tore through the air with a high, electrical whine, and slammed into the Nightmare’s side with a sound like thunder. More large cracks splintered across its shell, exposing more of that burning interior, and it set its eyes onto Kairi, mouth stretched permanently wide in a grin that froze her blood. Taking a chance, Kairi squeezed onto her ketak with her knees as she quickly summoned her Keyblade, aiming and firing a Blizzard spell into one of its burning eyes, just as Roxas fired at it with his own ketak.

The Leviathan howled at the attacks, rearing up and thrashing before swinging one of its large claws at Roxas, lava bubbling up and sparkling behind its teeth. Roxas dodged the swipe, and Kairi used its distraction to fire another blast at it and following up with a Thunder spell, nudging her ship closer. Roxas cast his own magic, hitting it with another Blizzard, and it roared at them,
whipping around to try and take both of them out with its large tail.

They dodged, continuing to fire energy beams at it as it whirled around, but didn’t see the lava bubbling over behind its teeth until it was too late, that razor grin stretched impossibly wider. Letting out another glass shattering scream as it faced them, it let out a wide, pressurized stream of boiling hot steam.

Kairi escaped it, but barely, and cried out at the pain erupting on her right side, burns quickly blossoming on the skin of her arm. Roxas’ loud scream hit her ears, and her pain was quickly forgotten as she saw Roxas take a brunt of the blast, his ketak beginning to spark and fizzle at the attack, quickly spinning out of control.

His Dream Eater roared as Roxas went limp from the pain; it leaped, landing on the surface of the barrier with a spark of light before lunging at the Nightmare, leaving Roxas slipping off his ketak as the lights in the ship flickered, sputtered, and then died, exploding in a blinding light as Roxas fell to the earth.

“No!”

Kairi’s heart jumped, and her stomach slammed into her throat as she forced her ship into a dive, speeding down, down, down, jerking her ship back up in time to let Roxas slam into her with a grunt, stopping his tumble into the lava. His charmed clothing was still intact, but the skin of his back and shoulders were horribly burnt, ugly red blisters already beginning to appear. He was barely conscious, head lolling forward as he wheezed out soft, painful breaths into her collarbone.

“Roxas, it’s okay,” Kairi babbled, working quickly to sit him upright, making sure to not touch his burns. “Stay with me, okay? Just hang on, we’re gonna be fine, we’re —”

Above them, the Leviathan screamed, and began to slam at the barrier once again, the collision of its claws echoing across the air. Panting at the effort to keep a hold on Roxas and her ship afloat, Kairi raised her Keyblade into the air, gritting her teeth at how the action pulled at the burns on her arm.

“Heal.”

A large flower bloomed in the air, glowing vines spreading downward and wrapping around them, and Kairi relaxed as relief rushed over her like cool water, the pain quickly disappearing as her burns healed. She felt Roxas slump against her with a sigh as his burns healed as well, and Kairi lowered her Keyblade, magic completely wiped out from using her strongest healing spell.

“You okay?” She wheezed as Roxas slowly sat up, wincing, “all good?”

“All good.” Roxas confirmed. “Thank you, Kairi.”

“How are we going to do this now?” Kairi fished into her pack for an Elixir and pulled the stopper out with her teeth to quickly down it, sighing as her magical exhaustion faded. “I don’t think we can destroy this with just one ship.”

“No.” Roxas agreed, staring up at the Nightmare as it continued to slam at the force field, paying no mind to how it sparked up like lighting at its touch. “It keeps trying to break it,” he observed, “even though it’s getting hurt by it, look.”
He pointed, and Kairi could see that the lightning coming off the barrier wasn’t just a reaction to the Nightmare’s presence; should could see it striking out at the Nightmare, causing more cracks to spread across its hull.

“It’s really determined to get through,” Kairi said, grim, pressing her lips into a thin line.

“Yeah. We won’t let it, though. Okay.” Roxas looked back at her, “are you okay with me driving? Or do you want your ship back?”

“I’m good. You’ve got an idea?”

“I guess?” He began to move, sending the ketak back up towards the Nightmare, “we’ve just – I think if we crack that thing’s shell apart, it’ll be easier to take out.”

“Okay….alright. Let’s try it.” Kairi looked down at her Dream Eater, puffed up in aggression as it stared at the large Nightmare. “You ready?”

It screeched, flapping its wings, and Kairi sent it off, “okay, get going! Help Roxas’ Dream Eater out!” With a mighty flap of its wings, her dragon took off, sending a gust of dragon’s breath at the Nightmare’s hide just as Roxas’ lion cast a Spark spell, a ring of lights rotating around its mane as it threw the lights like daggers, further cracking the shell.

“Save your magic, okay?” Roxas said as they neared the top of the barrier, “I’ve got an idea for something. Just focus on cracking it open for now.”

“Let’s hope you’re right about this!” Kairi clutched at her Keyblade once they got back into the Nightmare’s space, rising up and hanging onto the ship with her knees while Roxas fired another blast at its side. Screaming, it whirled around again, attempting to use its large tail again to knock them away like they were pests. Roxas dived to evade, and Kairi lashed out with a grunt, getting two solid hits in and watching triumphantly as more of that crystal hide crumbled away.

They danced around it, slowly chipping away at more and more of its form, the aid of their Dream Eaters keeping its attention divided until it reached its limit and reared up onto its many spindly legs, lava dripping from its fangs as it sent another wide blast of pressurized steam at them. Roxas dodged it by the skin of his teeth, and Kairi caught the heavy scent of sulfur as it passed by them, the heat of it ruffling her hair.

Kairi’s thighs burned, and her knees were shaking at the effort of staying upright for so long, but their hard work was paying off; large swaths of glowing red were exposed to the air, and its crystal shell was so littered with cracks, she felt like one good hit would make it fall apart.

“Is that good enough?” She panted, lowering her Keyblade, “should be enough to take it down, right?”

“We’re about to find out.” Roxas lowered the ketak down to the barrier, “since our Dream Eaters can stand on it, we probably can too, right?”

He didn’t wait for an answer as he gently landed the ketak onto the barrier, scrambling off the ship before helping Kairi down. “It’s going to feel weird,” he warned, and Kairi hissed once her feet touched the barrier, feeling a static charge cover her skin. The barrier was overflowing with magic, brimming with so much light and thunder Kairi felt like her hair was standing on end.
A low, threatening rumble shook Kairi’s ribs, and she looked up in time to see one large claw rushing at them, ready to swipe them away. She lifted her Keyblade in time to cast a Reflect spell, the rippling barrier quickly encasing the two of them and bouncing the claw away. The Nightmare’s burning eyes and wide grin towered over them, and Kairi shivered, holding her Keyblade at the ready.

“What now?” She asked, keeping her eyes locked on their threat.

“We’re gonna light it up.” Roxas said, Oathkeeper and Oblivion appearing in his hands. His palms began to glow with light, “it’s gonna take a minute, but we’ll keep it busy until then, okay? You remember that other spell we were practicing?”

“Is that -?!” Kairi and Roxas simultaneously raised their Keyblades to block another swipe from the Leviathan, the force of its swing still sending them skidding backwards a few feet. “Is that – spell - going – to work?!” Kairi grunted, the two of them shoving the large claw back with a yell.

“Yeah!” Roxas struck out at the Nightmare, landing enough hits to send him airborne, more crystalline pieces skittering to the ground. “We can do it!”

He shot her a grin as he landed next to her, and Kairi huffed and began to prepare the spell, the two of them crouching and getting ready to leap. “This better work!!” She yelled, and they jumped into the air, Keyblades raised and ready to strike.

The Leviathan roared, and Kairi could see the lava spitting behind its teeth as it readied another attempt to burn them. Using her panicked move from the bayou, Kairi made sure to put an end to that before it even started and cast a Blizzara into its mouth. It cut off its attack with a choked scream, unprepared for the double uppercut attack that sent it skittering backwards, the clawed forelimbs that were keeping it anchored to the barrier losing purchase.

They kept their momentum going, pushing forward and swinging at it, Roxas crossing his blades and disappearing in a flash of light, only to reappear and slash at its exposed stomach. More shell fell away, and the tender flesh beneath it glowed, burning hot.

Her dragon dived for its eyes, clawing at them, and the Nightmare retreated further, screaming and swiping at them as they slowly chipped it away.

Kairi could feel the magic in the air, building and building – she burned with it, felt like she was on fire, and when she struck out again with her Keyblade, Kairi could see a silvery glow emanating from beneath her skin.

“No!!” Roxas yelled as he landed beneath the Nightmare’s exposed underbelly, skidding across the surface of the barrier, sparks of lightning rising in his wake, “Kairi, do it now!!”

Roxas was lit up, radiating golden light as he was lifted off the ground, thirteen balls of light beginning to form around him in a circle. At his feet, a sigil appeared, giving off a bright, silvery light, and Kairi descended towards it, flipping her Keyblade into a reverse grip and holding it over her head with both hands.

She landed at Roxas’ feet and with a yell, jammed her Keyblade into the sigil, partially slicing into the barrier. Right away, it was like she touched an electrical socket, and she felt like her hair was standing on end, the light in her growing brighter and brighter, blinding.
Gritting her teeth, Kairi turned her Keyblade as though she was turning a lock, and a large, glowing sphere appeared above them, crackling with the same electric energy as the barrier, just as Roxas pushed his spheres of light outward, turning them into tall spears, sizzling with light magic.

The magic rushed over them, burning, electric, and the Nightmare screamed.

Its shrieks were loud death knells, and Kairi’s ears rang from the noise, but she squeezed her eyes shut and pushed through, pouring more magic out, more, more, until everything around them exploded with light.

They didn’t let up until they heard those crackling screams dwindle out into nothing, Kairi opening her eyes in time to see the Nightmare slump over with a ‘crack’. The burning light beneath its crystal shell was gone, its fried skin looking like dried magma, and the glow in its eyes had gone out, leaving two hollow sockets, mouth still frozen in that unnaturally wide razor smile.

Kairi felt like she was about to pass out, absolutely drained, but Roxas helped her to her feet as the barrier began to shake under their feet, beginning to dissolve as the threat passed for good. They gathered up their Dream Eaters and scrambled to their last ketak, Roxas giving her a helping hand onto the ship, starting it up and floating into the air just as the barrier began to crumble.

The Nightmare slipped through the widening gap, fading away into nothing before it could hit the ground, and the air began to vibrate with the relieved cries of the Atlanteans.

“We did it!” Kairi sighed, leaning against Roxas’ back as he slowly brought the ketak down to the platform at the center of the city. Milo was on them as soon as they touched the ground, face pale.

“You – you did it!! Kairi – Roxas, that – that was incredible! Are you two alright, are you hurt anywhere?! Do you –”

“Milo.” Roxas pointed up at the crystal hovering over the city. “Look.”

The light had slowly died down, the plaques pulling back in towards the light until the crystal was almost obscured. A beam of light spilled from the bottom of the crystal, aimed at the platform, and Milo took a couple shaky steps forward.

From the light, a woman slowly appeared, eyes closed, white hair floating around her face. Her blue dress fluttered around her as she slowly floated to the ground, crystal necklace hovering in the air and one hand clasped to her chest.

Milo had raced forward the moment she appeared and was waiting below as Kida gently landed into his arms.

The beam of light vanished as soon as Kida slumped into Milo’s arms, and she groaned softly before slowly waking up, blue eyes fluttering open. She looked around, wary, and when her eyes drifted up to Milo, she sagged into him with a sigh of relief.

“Milo,” she whispered, “is it gone?”

“It’s gone.” He confirmed, “it’s gone, and everyone’s safe. You did great, Kida.”
“Mm. I can feel it.” She closed her eyes, “the air feels lighter. Cleaner. The darkness is gone.”

“We had a little help.” Milo waved them over, and after getting some help off the ketak, Kairi and Roxas made their way over. “Kida,” he said once they were near, “this is Roxas and Kairi. They’re from the outside, they came to help us.”

Kida looked over them with sharp eyes, and Roxas gave her a tired wave as Kairi smiled, “hello. We’re glad you’re okay, your highness.”

“You helped me save my home,” Kida said, standing straighter, “it is I who should be thanking you. I think…it if you hadn’t come, I’d still be up there. I’d be lost.”

She smiled at them, pulling her hand away from her chest and beginning to reach out to them, but stopping when she noticed something in her hand, brows wrinkling in confusion. “What is this…?” she asked softly, staring at whatever was cradled in her hand, “Milo, do you recognize –”

Kairi caught a glimpse of what was in Kida’s hand, and she stiffened, clutching tightly at Roxas’ arm to get his attention. He followed her stare, and when Roxas saw it, he gasped, looking like he’d been struck.

Cradled in the palm of Kida’s hand was a painfully familiar crown necklace, the silver gleaming in the light.

“Oh –” Kairi covered her mouth, eyes filling up with tears, and Roxas stepped forward, shaky. “Um –” His voice cracked a little, and he cleared his throat, “Uh – I think that’s – that’s for us.”

Kida looked up at them, and then back down at the necklace, and she brushed the tips of her fingers over it. “Such a faint light…” she murmured, “yes…it does not belong here. It must go with you.”

Holding the necklace up by the chain, Kida stepped out of the circle of Milo’s arms to place the necklace over Roxas’ head, nodding in satisfaction once the crown rested over his heart. “Lucky to come to me when it did. I kept it safe. But it belongs with you,” she said quietly, pressing her fingers against the crown for a final time, and Roxas nodded, lips pressed into a thin line.

“Thank you,” he said, soft but full of emotion, “thank you.”

“No,” Kida shook her head, “thank you. Kairi. Roxas. You got rid of the darkness that surrounded my home. For that, I am grateful, always. If you ever return, you two will always be welcome to Atlantis.”

Kairi wiped at her eyes as Roxas gave Kida a small smile, and she reached out to squeeze their hands in thanks before returning to Milo’s side. “Kida,” he said softly, wrapping an arm around her waist, “come on, you need to rest. You were up there for a long time.”

Smiling, Milo looked up at them, grateful, “thank you,” he said, so full of feeling. “We’re in your debt.”

Kida nodded at them in farewell as Milo led her into the ecstatic crowd of Atlanteans, happy to see their Queen returned to them safe and sound, and soon they were swallowed up, out of sight.
With a gusty sigh, Kairi sank onto the cold stone of the platform, “I’m exhausted”.

Roxas dropped to the ground next to her, one hand still cradled around the fragment draped around his neck. “I want to sleep for like…a week.” Roxas agreed, “but – we did it. And we found more fragments.”

“We did do that.” Kairi looked up at the crystal that floated above the city, and her eyes widened as she caught a glitter of something against one of the plaques. “Roxas – look.”

She pointed at one of the plaques – newer than the other nine, with a carving of a man, tattoos stretching over his head and across the bridge of his nose, long hair and beard streaming down the stone. There, at the bottom of the carving, was a shining keyhole.

With a sigh, Kairi pushed herself up to her feet, and summoned Destiny’s Embrace in one hand as she offered her other hand to help Roxas up with a smile. “Alright,” she said happily, pulling Roxas to his feet as Oathkeeper appeared. “On to the next?”

“Yeah.” Roxas smiled back at her, “on to the next.”

Together, the two of them raised their Keyblades up to the keyhole, and twin beams of light raced up into the sky.

Kairi closed her eyes, beginning to focus, and the click of the unlocked keyhole echoed in her ears. Just like that, the world fell away, and Kairi felt Roxas’ hand slip out of hers as she fell backwards, deeply asleep.

-K-

**Keychain Received: Heart of Atlantis**

**Keychain Received: Kings of the Past**

Chapter End Notes

my keychain names for this world are SO original, I know lmao

fun fact! did you know that kida's name originates from a kiowa name and means 'raising the darkness'? this shit writes itself. of COURSE I had to do atlantis, do you KNOW how much I LOVE THAT MOVIE!!! that movie was my SHIT when I was a kid.

so there we are! world two, done and done, and I feel pretty good about it. I've got mmmmm five worlds planned in total, so three more to go!

I hope y'all enjoyed the roxas/kairi team up! it was really fun to work on, everything came out pretty much the way I wanted it lmao. also, regarding their outfits - for kairi,
think audrey without the hat. for roxas think kinda milo when they were exploring.

and y'all, thank you so so SO much for the reviews for the last chapter. I was over the fucking moon, reading them all. I try and reply to each one but I dropped the ball on the two comments I've recently gotten. but REST ASSURED I reread them RELIGIOUSLY. I smile like a loser every time.

I am genuinely so grateful and happy that people are liking my story so far. and the tears were just extra validation. we're all having fun here!

thank you so much, you guys. comments and kudos are so loved.

see you next chapter!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

by the time this chapter is up, it is going to be 2 in the cursed morning.

I'm wiped to shit but I had to get this chapter up. I HAD to. it's haunted me for WEEKS.

a lot's happened! had a birthday, that was cool, I'm 26 now so holy shit to that. this whole chapter was like pulling fucking teeth 'cause I had to struggle going with the whole plot of the movie but making sure Kairi had plenty to do to make things feel A LITTLE DIFFERENT. that was so hard. but we made it!!! at least I hope I did.

I watched treasure planet for the first time ever to make this happen. it was HEAVILY REQUESTED by my brother to attempt this world.

so! yeah! idk what else to add in this top note. it's 1am y'all.

everything unbeta'd and edited by me, let's do this shit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Space whales*, Kairi thought, awed, as she stared out over the side of the ship. *I've never seen space whales before.*

Placing her chin on her crossed arms, Kairi looked on as the giant pod of whales slowly passed by, the whale leading the pod looking over her with one of its large eyes. A breeze ruffled her hair around as the whales continued onward, and Kairi sighed a little as she stared out into the colorful patchwork of space, millions of stars glittering as far as she could see.

It’s been months – *months*, Kairi repeated to herself, stunned – since she crash-landed on this new, very expansive world, shaken awake in the bowels of a *royal navy ship* to face her very distrustful Captain. Grabbed and roughly escorted to the Captain’s chambers by her First Mate – a large rock of a man - Kairi tried not to flinch away from the tight grip on her arm, at all the eyes on her from – from *aliens*, their whispers hissing across the deck.

From what she could see, the ship looked like something out of storybooks – a pristine, golden thing, white sails billowing as they waited for takeoff. The crew….didn’t match the shine of the ship at all, Kairi eyeing them warily as they looked her up and down, sizing her up.

Around her shoulders, her Dream Eater growled softly at her rough treatment, and Kairi’s eyes narrowed slightly as she looked around, wondering where she ended up this time. She doesn’t see Roxas anywhere at all; when she woke up, she woke up alone, and her heart sank a little in disappointment at that.

And fear.
She wouldn’t let it show, though, setting her jaw and stumbling after the rock man’s quick pace, steeping herself as he reached a door, rapping his knuckles against it to announce his presence before dragging her inside.

“Captain,” he announced, “I have brought someone to you; one of the crew found her down below. Seems we have a stowaway.”

Kairi was shoved forward, and she stumbled a little before straightening up, taking in the Captain’s quarters. A woman Kairi assumed to be the Captain turned away from a cabinet to look at her, tucking the key she used to lock it into the pocket of her navy-blue jacket before lacing her hands behind her back, looking at her with sharp green eyes.

There were two other people in the room as well – a young boy, a few years younger than her at least, staring at her with suspicious blue eyes, and an alien man in a large, ridiculous space suit with features that vaguely reminded her of Goofy.

“Well?” Kairi’s eyes snapped back to the Captain at her cool tone. “Explain yourself. How did you end up on my ship?”

With all eyes on her, Kairi shivered, pressing her hands over her racing heart. She was on this ship for a reason – she couldn’t have ended up here just by chance. Wherever this ship was going, that was where she needed to be. Sora was waiting for her.

Her mouth was dry, and she nervously licked her lips, eyes drifting down to the floor. “I…I’m sorry,” she began in a hoarse whisper, “I – I have no one else, no family, and I need – I needed the work.”

She looked back up at the Captain, earnest, “I’m sorry for sneaking on, I – I’m a good worker, I promise, whatever you need, I can do it! Please don’t throw me off, I –” She didn’t have to fake the tears filling her eyes, already daunted at having to face another unknown world alone. She couldn’t bear the thought of not being able to accomplish what she was sent here to do.

“I have nowhere else to go.” She croaked, helpless, “I can work. I can. Please.”

Impassive, the Captain continued to stare at her, one of her ears twitching in a way that reminded Kairi of a cat. After a moment of heavy silence, occasionally broken by her sniffing, she spoke, “well, Mister Arrow,” the Captain said crisply, “what say you?”

Behind her, the First Mate – Mister Arrow – hummed in thought, “what can you do, girl?”

“I –”

“I beg your pardon!” Ridiculous Spacesuit burst out, “are you really going to just let this – this stowaway stay on this ship? That is preposterous, she could be –”

“Doc – tor,” the Captain said, clipped, swiftly turning on her heel to face him, “how would this slip of a girl be any worse than the ship full of miscreants you hired on as my crew? Have a little sense.”

“But she could be after –”

“So,” she said loudly, cutting Ridiculous Spacesuit off as she turned to face Kairi, “girl? What can you do?”
“Um?” Her head spun, and she made a confused face at the distrustful squinting she was getting from Ridiculous Spacesuit, “I – I’m an islander, so, I’m – I’m good with rope, and knots. I can read the stars well enough, and uh –” She shrugged helplessly, “I can fish? But I don’t think it’ll do much good, here.”

Skeptical Boy snorted a little at that, and the Captain hummed thoughtfully, looking over her with a critical eye.

“Mister Arrow,” she finally said, “how do you feel about having a shadow with you on deck?”

Her First Mate stared at Kairi for a moment, thoughtful, before giving the captain a sharp nod, “easily done, Captain. We’ll get along right as rain.”

“What?” Skeptical Boy burst out, “how come she gets to work with him, but I have to be cabin boy?”

“I’ve heard tell of just how much of a troublemaker you are, Hawkins,” the Captain snapped, “the good doctor here has already borrowed enough trouble for me with this crew; I won’t accept any other mishaps.”

Hawkins glowered, but said nothing else, teeth grinding as he looked away, and the Captain sighed. “Now,” she continued, “Mister Arrow, would you please escort Doctor Doppler and young Hawkins here to their rooms, and introduce Hawkins to Silver while I talk to miss -?”

“Oh!” Kairi perked up, flushing slightly, “Kairi. I’m Kairi.”

“While I talk to Miss Kairi about her expected roles on this ship.”

“Aye, Captain Amelia.” Mister Arrow looked down at Kairi as Doctor Doppler and Hawkins passed by and extended one large hand for her to shake. “You’ll be with me, young lass,” he said firmly, “so be ready to work.”

Kairi nodded, words lodged in her throat, and after Mister Arrow took his leave, she was stuck with the very intimidating Captain.

Cocking her head, one of Amelia’s ears twitched again as she stared her down, “do you know why we’re here, Kairi?” she asked quietly.

“Um…no?” Her brows wrinkled at the question, confused, “I guess – you all are transporting some type of goods?”

Captain Amelia gave her another long stare, and Kairi squirmed in place until she turned on her heel and moved to her desk, sinking into the chair. “We are here,” she finally said, voice whisper quiet, “because we have been hired to go on a voyage to a place we only thought existed in stories.

“I am telling you this,” she continued, lacing her fingers under her chin, “so that you know to be wary. I’ve already told the doctor that I didn’t approve of his choice of motley crew, so I’ll warn you now – stay sharp. Until we reach our destination it will be…precarious.”

*What have I landed into?* Kairi despaired silently, bowing her head slightly in acquiescence, “Yes ma’am,” she mumbled, “I’ll be careful.”

“Good girl,” she said crisply, “now – off with you. Go find Mister Arrow, and he’ll show you
where your quarters will be. We’ll be taking off shortly.”

And here she was, a handful of months later, staring at a pod of space whales as they pass by.

Working on the R.L.S. Legacy wasn’t as difficult as she expected; she slowly carved her own space in the crew shadowing Mister Arrow, learning the ropes as a deckhand. She learns how to better read the stars, after ‘admitting’ that she was from a further part of the galaxy, with a different spread of stars, about navigation, steering – and that was an exciting lesson, to put it lightly.

With Mister Arrow, she learns the daily tasks and expectations of being a First Mate – and is also sequestered from the crew. Even now, standing and looking out beyond over the edge of the ship, she’s in her own little bubble, separate from everyone else.

Part of her prickles in annoyance at the treatment – she knows she could hold her own easily if anyone deigned to harass her. Annoyance aside, she’s used the space she’s been given to observe the crew across the deck, and honestly there really was just something about them that made her wary; she could understand why Captain Amelia stressed to have caution.

All this over some treasure? Kairi wondered, cupping her chin in her hand, lips pursed in thought. Seems silly.

Silly as it may be, she’ll keep an eye out all the same, just as she’s been doing for the past months. And she could handle the shadiness of the crew, at the very least – she could feel the conflict coming through the increasing tensions on the ship.

What she couldn’t handle was that this entire time, she hasn’t run into a single Nightmare.

Tapping her nails against the wood, Kairi’s lips thinned out further as her brow wrinkled in concern. She expected some kind of a threat on the way to this mystical treasure planet, but so far there hasn’t been anything – not a hint of that unnatural darkness has brushed across her senses.

She couldn’t feel any hints of where Sora could be, either, no trace of that faint light anywhere. It worried her, increased her anxiety more than any shady crew member could.

Sighing, Kairi ran a hand through her hair, blowing a stray strand out of her face, and decided to put the worries aside for now.

“Ah, little lass,” a voice drawled behind her, pulling her away from her thoughts, “you’re lookin’ like you’re a million lightyears away from here.”

Kairi’s ears perked at the lumbering approach, and she turned, answering their chef’s smile with one of her own. “Mister Silver,” she greeted, “how are you?”

“Tuh! Silver’s just fine. And I’m doin’ grand.” Grinning, he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, cybernetic eye glittering, “Just giving the little troublemaker something to do, par the course.”

Peeking around Silver, Kairi got a glimpse of Jim, frowning as he began to sweep the mop across the deck, the little pink blob of Silver’s shapeshifter, Morph, dancing around his head.
“Mopping? Again?” She smiled, bemused, and Silver let out a chuckle. “If he’s always given something to do, then there’s no time for him to borrow trouble, understand? But all’s well.” Silver gives her a playful wink, “something in it for him, at least, since later I’ll be taking one of the longboats for a spin – not that he knows, yet.”

Kairi laughed lightly, and Silver’s grin widened at the sound. “What about you, young miss? How goes it playing Arrow’s shadow?”

“Oh, it’s nice! I’ve enjoyed the work, and I’ve been learning a lot – there’s so much responsibility, being First Mate.”

“And seems you’ve taken to it like Orca to the stars.” He pats her on the shoulder, mechanical arm whirring with his movements. “Where’s your little pet gone to? Usually see it glued to you all day long.”

“Oh –” she gestured out into the expanse of space, “out flying. Probably nearby though, they don’t like to be far from me.”

“Loyal thing, that one.” Silver sighed, placing his hands on his hips, “now, hate to beg this of you, but mind keeping an eye on the pup for me? I’ve got Morph watching him, but extra eyes never hurt, and I need to get food whipped up for this greedy lot.”

“Ah….yeah, I can.”

“Good girl! Many thanks to ya!” With another pat on the shoulder, Silver made his way towards the kitchen, whistling a tune under his breath.

She didn’t miss some of the crew sneak a glance around before following him a moment after, and Kairi frowned at that, suspicious.

“Best be keeping those nosy eyes to yourself, girl,” a voice hissed near her ear, “’lest you want them plucked out of that pretty little head.”

With a small start, Kairi jerked her head away, whipping around to stare into the bulbous yellow eyes of Scroop, fangs to close to her face for her liking.

“Mister Scroop.” Taking a small step back, Kairi smiled, none of the warm gesture reaching her eyes, “still not done with harassing the younger ones, are you?”

“I’m here to remind you whelps of your place here.” Paying no mind to the space she tried to put between them, Scroop skittered back into her space, spider – like legs tapping against the wood. “You think you’re better than us just ‘cause you get to shadow that boulder all day? Like that gives you something to lord over us? You’ll fall just the same, you and that other loose- lipped brat.”

“Do you have something to hide, Mister Scroop?” She asked coolly, refusing to fall back as he got into her face again, “I was just watching Mister Silver return to the kitchens, nothing else, so I’m not understanding what you’re trying to insinuate.”

“You can play dumb all you like, girl, but I’m onto you. You and that other whelp working here.”
Snapping his large, sharp pincers, Scroop raised one claw towards her face, “you keep those eyes on the horizon and mind your own, you and that other meddler, else I’ll make sure you get your just rewards for sticking your nose where it never belonged.”

Scroop grinned, fangs clicking as he brought his claw closer to her face, beginning to scrape the sharp edge along the curve of her cheek.

Kairi had her Keyblade in her hand and pressed against his throat before he even had time to blink.

“What – Wh – How?!” His eyes, already so large, bugged out of his head, and Kairi took pleasure in it but didn’t let it show, keeping her face peacefully blank. “What is the meaning – magic? Some kind of witch?”

He spat the word at her, and Kairi felt her hackles rise at that.

“Mister Scroop,” she said, smiling pleasantly, “please remove your claw, unless you’d like me to remove it myself? I know the Captain wants our crew in peak condition for when we reach our destination, and I’d hate to tell her you lost an arm to an, ah…accident. Oh! Or –”

She innocently widened her eyes, pondering, “I can go fetch Mister Arrow? I know you had a very enlightening talk with him the last time you decided to bother one of the crew.”

He staggered back, away from her, and she didn’t dispel her Keyblade until his claw was away from her face. She could feel the eyes of the entire crew on her, now, and quietly despaired over it; she hadn’t wanted to summon her Keyblade at all, if she could help it. Now they all knew she was truly something other.

“How did you do that?” A voice said behind her, and Kairi turned to face Jim, who stared at her with awed eyes, mop in hand. “Are you magic or something?”

Kairi trailed her fingers down her dragon’s spine, considering. “Or something,” she finally said, looking up at him. “It’s not something I can teach, so don’t get your hopes up.” She laughed lightly at his disappointed scowl, “it’s just…something I could always do.”

“How did you do that?” A voice said behind her, and Kairi turned to face Jim, who stared at her with awed eyes, mop in hand. “Are you magic or something?”

Kairi smiled coolly, “I won’t let someone try and put their hands on me to intimidate me. Not again.”

“Oh. Yeah, I – I get that.”
“Cool.” Kairi let her expression warm up again and reached out to flick Jim lightly across the forehead, “besides, as long as you stay busy and don’t act like a twerp, I think we’ll reach our destination just fine.”

“Hey,” Jim griped, rubbing his forehead, “I’ve been doing great lately, Kairi, c’mon.”

“I believe you. Now, back to work!! I’ve got to go back, myself, but Silver told me to keep and eye on you, too.”

Jim really scowled at that, and Kairi laughed as she went back to her post, break officially over.

-o-

Kairi thought she knew what to expect on this journey; she’s dealt with space before, and all the various risks involved when she traveled through worlds with Riku.

But a supernova. She never expected something like this.

She was on the deck with Mister Arrow when a wave of heat struck the ship, so strong that it sent Kairi tumbling over with a startled cry. “What was that?!” She gasped as Mister Arrow quickly helped her to her feet, beginning to stumble over to the side of the ship just to see what that was.

From the distance, she heard Doctor Doppler gasp, looking through a telescope before declaring that a nearby star had gone supernova.

Things happened rather fast, after that.

Captain Amelia raced up the deck, calling for evasive action, and Mister Arrow hollered out, “all hands! Fasten your lifelines!” as the ship whipped around, racing to avoid another wave. Everyone scrambled across the deck, racing to the ropes and tying a loop around their waist, yanking on the knots to make sure the lines attached to them and the ship were secure.

Kairi had enough time to grasp her rope and plant her feet before the waves of the supernova struck them, the ship bathed in a fiery orange glow as small burning rocks raced through the atmosphere. She felt her eardrums pop at the pressure, and her knees buckled at the force of the winds, gripping tighter at her lifeline as she looked up, hair blowing into her face.

“Secure all sails!!” She heard Mister Arrow yell over the winds, “bring them down!!”

Pushing her hair out of her face, she ran for the rope ladder, climbing up with the rest of the crew, hand over hand, scrambling upwards. Arms out for balance, she scoots across the wooden beams, making her way towards the ropes to pull the sails up. Fireballs raced across the sky, some of them tearing through the sails, and Kairi’s heart pounded in her ears, almost as loud as the howling winds.

Yanking at the ropes to close the sails, Kairi kneeled to deftly tie the ends of the rope into the loop
to keep them closed and heard Jim cry out over the winds. Her hands shook, but Kairi stayed where she was; she had faith in Jim, faith in his ability to handle whatever happened. For now, she had to tie down the sails.

Sails taken care of, she scrambled back to the ladder and quickly began to climb down to the deck. Heat was bearing down on her shoulders, hotter and hotter, and as voices began to rise, panicked, Kairi looked up in time to see the largest ball of molten rock she’d ever seen, bearing down on their small ship.

She was frozen as the giant fireball rocketed towards them, and she couldn’t even find it in her to close her eyes to not see them get hit. The heat of it bearing down on them was inescapable, unbearable, and Kairi let out a shaky breath as it got closer and closer.

But the collision never came.

Confused, Kairi watched the fireball, inches away from slamming into the side of the ship, slowly pull away. A heavy wind tugged at her clothes, her hair pulled forward by the wind, and she squinted, confusion melting into horror when she saw where the rock was tumbling. The crew began to scream, their cries rippling across the deck as they saw what was before them.

The supernova had turned into a black hole.

The ship was yanked forward, caught in the unrelenting pull of the black hole, and Kairi felt like she was about to be sick, tripping to the deck as the ship was caught in another wave. A black hole……how could they escape this??

“All sails secure, Captain!!” she heard Mister Arrow yell over the winds.

“What?! Kairi wanted to shriek; what was the point of closing the sails if they were just going to be sent to open them again?! The remaining crew reflected her thoughts, groaning and cursing as they raced back up the ropes after Mister Arrow’s yelled command.

“Hawkins! Make sure all lifelines are secured good and tight!!”

They quickly unfurled the sails and slipped back down to the deck, racing back to their tether points as they tumbled into the singularity of the black hole. Clinging to the mast, Kairi watched the orange light fade away as they fell further and further into the black hole. The air was cold, the further they went, and Kairi squeezed her eyes shut, heart stuck in her throat.

In a fierce rush of emotion, she suddenly felt horribly alone; she wanted Roxas with her, missed Riku and Sora so much in that moment it throbbed with a bone deep ache. She whimpered, and it echoed in the sudden silence, the sting of tears prickling at her eyes.

A hand gently touched hers, and Kairi’s eyes snapped open to see Jim, staring at her, caged in by Silver as they fell. Clenching his jaw, he gave her hand another squeeze, and Kairi felt a few tears slip down her cheeks.
It was so dark, the cold and crushing feeling reminding her of that time after the war, those unknown days in that empty, overwhelming darkness, and Kairi’s throat closed in panic.

Everything rushed back to them in a wave of light and heat, Kairi’s stomach swooping up into her throat as they rocketed back upward, riding the gigantic blast wave back into the stars.

Kairi didn’t open her eyes until she heard the cheers echo across the ship, tinged with the relief of a near miss encounter with a black hole. As she slowly pried her fingers from the mast, unwinding the rope from around her waist, Captain Amelia made her way down the stairs, pleased.

“All hands accounted for, Mister Arrow?” Amelia was saying as the ringing cleared out of Kairi’s ears.

The Captain received silence in response, and Kairi’s heart dropped with foreboding, her already trembling hands beginning to shake anew.

“Mister Arrow?” Amelia called again, concerned, and the crowd parted, letting Scroop make his way towards them. He looked forlorn, distraught, and caught between his claws was a familiar black hat.

A rushing noise filled Kairi’s ears as she stared at that hat, feeling like she was hearing everything from the bottom of the sea. “I’m afraid Mister Arrow has been lost,” Scroop said mournfully, holding out the hat to the Captain. “His lifeline was not secured.”

Kairi’s eyes danced between Scroop and the hat clutched in Amelia’s hands in disbelief, Jim’s denial and protests about the lifeline reaching her in muffled tones

You keep those eyes on the horizon and mind your own, you and that other meddler, else I’ll make sure you get your just rewards for sticking your nose where it never belonged.

She didn’t know when she started to cry, but she blinked, and more tears streaked down her face, her heart aching as she heard the Captain begin to speak, voice shaky.

“Mister Arrow was a – a fine spacer….finer than most of us could ever hope to be…”

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“We have to be more cautious, now.” Amelia said stiffly, lowering herself into the seat at her desk. “With Mister Arrow gone, my hold on this ship is more tenuous than ever.”

Her face darkened at the mention of Mister Arrow, and Kairi slowly blinked at her, eyes red, the remains of her tears clinging in wet clumps to her lashes.

She was taken to Amelia’s office after she paid her respects to their lost First Mate, saying that Kairi needed to know what was expected of her now that their First Mate was gone. Her expression was dark, the Captain clearly thinking that she laid the blame of Mister Arrow’s loss upon Jim, and
his lack of care with the lifelines. Jim was still breathlessly protesting that the lines were secure, face distraught, and as Amelia took Kairi by the arm and began to lead her to her office, she took a moment to look over the faces of the crew.

Her face was still blotchy and tear stained, but her eyes were hard as steel, slowly taking everyone in. When her eyes landed on Scroop, she stared at him, unmoving, taking in how he grinned wickedly over towards Silver, thinking that no one saw.

She clenched her hand into a fist, the urge to summon her Keyblade a fierce tingle in her fingers. Nightmares were the least of her worries in this world; darkness found its way onto this ship through other means.

Kairi slowly came back to herself as Amelia continued to speak, “Kairi, you will have to fill Arrow’s place; be my eyes and ears, keep tabs on all the crew, everything they do until we reach our destination.” She scowled fiercely, “I will not have the loss of another crew member on my hands due to another’s shortcomings.”

“It wasn’t Jim.” Kairi’s voice carried softly across the room, her voice flat. “You can believe me, or you can’t – it doesn’t matter to me at all. Because I know who tampered with Mister Arrow’s lifeline.”

Amelia was silent, expression giving nothing away as she stared at Kairi. “The air has changed here,” she continued, not bending under the gaze of her Captain, “that is true. I can feel it. Something will happen, and soon, whether we like it or not. We just need to make sure we’re ready for it.”

Taking a step back, she bowed her head in deference, “I need to sleep. Today was – I have a lot to think about. May I be excused?”

“…You may.” Amelia finally said. “Sleep well, Kairi.”

“And you, Captain.”

Heading to her sleeping quarters, she saw Jim, getting ready to head into his own sleeping quarters. His eyes were rimmed with red, but he looked a little better than he did when she last saw him, some of the distress lifted away from his shoulders.

“Jim.”

His posture stiffened a little at her voice, and when he turned to face her, he couldn’t really look her in the eye. “Hey, Kairi,” he said, tense, “are you – are you okay? After all that?”

“Yeah. Are you?”

“I’m – it doesn’t matter.” He scuffed his boot across the wood. “Kairi, I – I’m sorry.”

She tilted her head to the side, “why are you sorry?”

“It was my fault. What happened to Arrow. I thought I checked the lines, but –”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Her firm tone, her absolute belief in her words, made Jim look up at her in
surprise. “No, you didn’t do this. I know exactly where the fault lies, here.”

He looked awed at her automatic belief, and Kairi smiled at him, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Jim. It’s gonna be fine. Make sure you sleep, okay?”

“Okay.” His eyes drifted back to the ground for a second before he looked back up at Kairi and gave her a weak smile, “…thanks.”

“Mm. Goodnight.”

When she made it to her sleeping quarters, it took her a while to settle down enough to sleep, staring out at the stars through her small window until she drifted off. And when she finally drifted off to sleep, she dreamed.

It felt familiar, like a memory – but still a dream, past mixing in with her hope for the future. She was in Sora’s room, the way they were before he and Riku were summoned for the Mark of Mastery, the three of them sandwiched together on Sora’s bed.

Though her eyes were closed she knew she was curled up in the middle, like always, Sora at her front, Riku at her back. She could hear them talking, voices in low murmurs, and even though she was so close to them, she couldn’t make out what they were saying. She could feel Sora’s hand, warm, resting against the curve of her ribs, and Riku’s arm draped across her waist, his chest pressed against her back.

Being so close to them, Kairi hadn’t felt this safe and warm in months; she missed her boys, her best friends, missed them more than anything, and the loneliness she’s felt all these months echoed in her chest with a keen ache.

In the distance, she could hear Sora’s parents, Jun laughing as Aouli said something, Nalani’s joyful squeals rising in response to his words.

She wanted this future, wanted it so badly she ached for it. I will have this, she fiercely vowed to herself, I’ll fight with all that I have to make this happen. I will.

Warm and curled up between her boys, she sank deeper into the dream and slept.

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Kairi knew that things would reach a breaking point on the ship soon; she knew that something would eventually have to give. She just didn’t expect things to give the next day.

The day started normally, at first; she woke up, dressed, gave her Dream Eater its morning candy and scritches, and made her way towards the deck. She could hear Jim laughing, heavy footsteps pounding as he called for Morph, and Kairi smiled at the noise, glad to hear that Jim’s spirits had lifted some after yesterday’s events.

Kairi quickly made rounds around the deck, taking in the fact that there were less crew on deck
than there should have been. She frowned, and jumped a little, startled, from the burst of raised voices, hissing from the kitchens below.

Suspicion began to tug at her, and she turned to face the entrance to the kitchens, beginning to move towards the doors and whatever was going on down below.

“Land ho!!”

The exultant yell pulled Kairi away from the kitchens, following the excited crew to the side of the ship to see the approaching land.

Treasure Planet.

It loomed ahead of them with a faint greenish glow, surrounded by a ring of asteroids and a ring of bright, vibrant green.

She took a moment to stare at the planet, awed at the sight of it. “Wow,” she whispered softly; no matter how often she travels through space, it never stops being incredible. The remaining crew rushed from the kitchens, hanging over the side of the ship with wide smiles as they took in the incoming planet.

Knowing that the Captain would need to be informed that they were approaching land, Kairi pushed her way through the crowd to make her way towards the Captain’s office. She was going up the stairs when she heard a strangled yell and whipped around just as Jim was barreling up the stairs, face pale.

“Jim?” She reached out to him, concerned, “what –?”

Shaking his head, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her along, throwing them into the Captain’s office before slamming the door shut, quickly throwing the locks. Captain Amelia looked up at them from her desk, Doctor Doppler at her side, and raised an eyebrow in question at them rudely barging into her space.

“What the hell?!?” She cried out, rubbing at her wrist, “Jim, what on earth -?!”

Through the door, Kairi heard a high, sharp whistle, and the crew roared in response.


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Things had to move rather quickly, after an announcement like that.

Kairi stayed at the rear as she scrambled after Jim, Amelia, and Doctor Doppler, the four of them racing to the bowels of the ship towards the longboats after cutting a hasty escape route out of the Captain’s quarters.

They hopped into one of the longboats at Amelia’s barked orders, pulling back the lever to open the large hatch, wind blowing upward to tousle their hair as they stared at the green surface far below them.
Sparks began to fly from the locked metal door as their Captain swung into the longboat, whipping the gun off her back and cocking it with a scowl, and Kairi’s hand itched, her desire to summon her Keyblade so strong it made her shake.

“Morph!! No!!”

She startled at the sound of Jim’s voice, whirling around as he jumped off the longboat and ran further into the ship, chasing after Morph who was squealing in delight, the spherical map of Treasure Planet caught up in his jaws.

As Jim moved out of her sight, the door burst open, and the heat of lasers quickly filled the air, Kairi quickly ducking behind Amelia and Doctor Doppler as the two of them began to shoot. Hissing air out through her teeth, Kairi gave in to her urge and brought Destiny’s Embrace into her hand, just in time to cast a quick Reflect spell, a few shots meant for Amelia bouncing harmlessly off the barrier she created.

Her Captain turned to look at her with wide eyes, glancing over the glittering blade in her hands, just as Doctor Doppler shot wildly into the air. The shot cut through a line of rope, sending a large metal object crashing into the deck, destroying it, and sending three of the mutinous crew coming their way screaming through the hatch, plummeting to the ground.

That pulled attention away from Kairi’s sudden weapon, and Amelia stared at Doctor Doppler, awed. “Did you actually aim for that?”

“You know what,” he said slowly, “actually, I did.”

“Captain,” Kairi ducked away from another volley of lasers, Keyblade at her side, “Captain, Jim, he – Morph took the map and Jim –”

The loud grind of gears cut her off, and the three of them looked over the side of the longboat to see the hatch below them slowly start to close.

Their escape route was getting shut off.

Amelia cursed loudly, eyes darting around before landing on the cables holding the longboat aloft. “Doctor,” she said, a plan quickly forming in her eyes, “when I say, shoot out the forward cable. I’ll shoot the other one.”

“But Jim, he –!”

“If he wants to get out of here then he damn well better find that shifter and the map and hurry up!” Amelia snapped. “We don’t have time!!”

“Just – a minute. Just give him a minute!!” Kairi cast another barrier around the ship, protecting them from another round of shooting. “I can hold this!” She said firmly, “so give Jim some time!!”

Grinding her teeth, Kairi held up her Reflect spell as Amelia and Doppler aimed for their respective ropes, waiting as shots aimed for them continued to bounce away from them. “I heard rumors of a witch on board,” Doppler said over the noise, “but I had no idea this rumor would actually hold merit.”

Kairi cut her eyes over to Doppler, rankled at the ‘witch’ comment, but said nothing, maintaining her concentration on her magic. She didn’t relax until she saw Jim sprinting back towards the
longboat, map clutched tight in his fist, and Kairi dropped the spell with a sigh, sagging, as Amelia shouted, “now!!”

Jim leaped onto the boat just as their shots cut the ropes, the bottom off the boat slamming into the lip of the hatch hard enough to rattle Kairi’s teeth. And then they were falling, spinning through open air, Jim clinging onto the side of the boat as they fell. Her Dream Eater screeched into her ear, and Kairi kept her eyes on the boat as her stomach slammed into her throat, Doppler yanking Jim onto the longboat as Amelia yanked open the sails, quickly starting the boat up so they could speed away.

Once the ship started to shrink from their vision, Kairi slowly relaxed, sighing softly. “Captain. What do we do now?”

“We have the map. So once we land, we’ll –”

“Captain!” Doppler cut them off, rushed, “Laser ball at 12 o’clock-!”

Amelia yanked the ship to the side, attempting to evade, and Kairi looked up in time to see a large, crackling ball of energy slam into the back of their ship.

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They were stranded.

Longboat destroyed, no crew, no map, and they were stranded.

Kairi felt a little helpless, gnawing on her thumb as she watched Doctor Doppler see to the wounds their Captain received from the destruction of their longboat. They all received some injuries from crash landing on Treasure Planet, Kairi nursing a wicked scrape down her side and plenty of bruises, and she wished that she could Cure their injuries away.

Amelia got hurt the worst out of the four, and was currently leaning against Doctor Doppler, arm wrapped in a sling and favoring her left side as they waited for Jim to return from scouting.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, Kairi sighed as she tilted her head back, looking up at the towering fungal fauna that made up the plant life of this world. She didn’t expect everything on the ship to fall apart so quickly; she felt the tension, of course, the build of mistrust and conflict, but she didn’t truly expect a break until this suspected treasure was found. Her stomach ached with anxiety, knowing that those pirates were scouring the planet, looking for them, believing they had the map in their possession.

“What a mess.” Kairi whispered, burying her face into her knees, clutching at her pants. She hoped Jim was alright, hoped he was safe; it’d been a while since he’d run off, instructed to find a safer space for them, and she prayed that he hadn’t been found.

“Kairi.” Captain Amelia’s voice drifted over to her, faint from the pain, and Kairi turned to face her. “I feel I should apologize, for involving you in this. You just wanted work, not –” she vaguely
gestured to their surroundings, “– not all this.

“We’ve put you in unnecessary danger,” she continued, weary, “I’ve put you in unnecessary danger. And for that, I’m sorry.”

Blinking, Kairi stared at the Captain, her expression giving nothing away. She cocked her head to the side just as Amelia began to fidget, and she smiled, her nose wrinkling with the gesture. “It’s fine,” she said quietly, turning back to look up at the sky, “I’ve ended up here for a reason, I think. I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

And she meant that, felt the certainty of what she was saying settle deep into her bones. All of the months she’s spent quietly worrying, of wondering if she’d ever find a piece of Sora in this large, expansive place – it was about to come to a head, soon.

Closing her eyes, she stretched her senses out, and she bit her lip to hide her ecstatic smile when, for the first time in months, she felt a light, familiar touch in return.

They were close.

“It’s okay,” she continued, opening her eyes, “we’re going to get out of here. I believe that.”

“Guys!”

Kairi started at the sound of Jim’s voice, and hopped to her feet as he appeared, running towards them with a wide grin.

“Jim!” Doctor Doppler said, relief etched into the lines of his face, “thank goodness you’re alright. Is everything fine? Did you find anything?”

“Yeah, everything’s good.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, “I found someone that’s been stuck here, they have a place where we can hide!”

“Oh, wonderful.” Amelia grunted, beginning to struggle to her feet, “let’s make our way there, then –”

“Ah, nope.” Doctor Doppler quickly scooped Amelia up before she had time to protest, “Captain, I really can’t allow you trying to walk in the condition you’re currently in! You’ll only worsen your injuries, at this rate.”

Their Captain blinked, too stunned to reply, and Doctor Doppler looked up at Jim and Kairi, readjusting his grip, “alright, Jim – lead the way.”

Urging them onward, Jim carefully led them through the brush of Treasure Planet, taking care to keep them out of sight, in case the pirates came around, making another sweep. By now, it was starting to get dark, the sky a burnished orange as night began to fall, and Jim quickly took them across a large, open plain, towards a large metal structure, draped in the same murky fungal moss that covered the planet. At the mouth of the structure, a small robot, covered in rust, was waiting for them, large green eyes darting around erratically as they wrung their hands, wires sticking out from the back of their head in a curled jumble.

“Jim!” the robot burst out once they’d gotten closer, “you’re back!”

“I’m back,” he agreed, “and I brought my friends, see? Can we come in now?”
“Sure, sure, come on! Uh, pardon the mess, people.” The robot smiled, sheepish, and quickly began attempts to straighten the space up, “you’d think in a hundred years I would’ve dusted a little more often…but, y’know – when you’re batchin’ it, you just tend to let some things go.”

“Jim,” Kairi whispered, as Doctor Doppler gently laid a woozy Amelia down, stuttering in protest as the robot began to coo over them, “who is this?”

“He said his name’s B.E.N.,” he whispered back, “he’s been here forever. Says he used to work with Captain Flint.”

His voice was awed when he said that, and Kairi smiled, bemused. “That guy with all the treasure that we’re hunting? That’s lucky of us.”

“Mister Hawkins.” They turned at the sound of Amelia’s voice in time to see their Captain struggling to sit up, “You stop anyone that tries to approach – oh!” She fell back, hissing, clutching at her side, and Kairi hopped to her feet as Doctor Doppler folded his jacket into a pillow, gently pushing Amelia back down.

“Stop giving orders for just a few milliseconds and lie down,” he quietly scolded, and Amelia smirked at him, the gesture pained. “Very forceful, Doctor – go on, say something else.”

“Hey, look!! There’s some more of your buddies!!” B.E.N. was standing at the lip of the entrance, pointing, and Jim’s eyes widened as he whipped around, pulling out the gun their Captain gave him.

“Wait, no -!”

“Hey, fellas!” B.E.N. yelled, hopping up and down, and Kairi felt her stomach sink into her shoes, “We’re over here, fellas!!”

The sound of gunfire quickly filled the air, and Kairi shrieked as white-hot pain flared up on her shoulder, one of the stray shots B.E.N. had dodged hitting her.

“Kairi!!” Jim yanked B.E.N. to the ground, squinting as he quickly began to return fire, “are you okay?! Can you move?!”

“I’m fine,” she hissed out through gritted teeth, summoning her Keyblade as she sank to the floor, ignoring her throbbing shoulder as she moved next to Jim, the heat of missed shots ruffling her hair. “There’s too many,” she whispered frantically after a quick peek over the edge, “we have to get rid of them all somehow – I can –”

“Stop wastin’ your fire!” A voice bellowed, and she could feel Jim stiffen up next to her at the sound of Silver’s voice.

“Hello, up there!” The sounds of gunfire died down, and Kairi peeked over the edge with Jim to see Silver, waving a little white flag. “Jimbo?”

He lumbered closer, now leaning heavily on his cybernetic arm, using it as a cane, and attempted a warm smile. “If it’s alright with the Captain, I’d like a short word with ya. No tricks!” He swore, “just a little palaver.”
Kairi and Jim shared a look of disbelief, and behind them, Amelia began to struggle to her feet once again. “Come to bargain for the map, doubtless,” she hissed, “pestilential –”

She groaned in pain, strength giving out as Doctor Doppler gently pushed her back down with an admonishing “Captain”.

Kairi reached out, grabbing Jim’s sleeve, and tugged until she got his attention. He looked at her, and the same realization that hit her was filling his eyes.

“He thinks we still have the map.” He whispered, and she nodded, letting him go to press a hand against her wounded shoulder. “Talk to him. Can you do it?”

Taking a deep breath, Jim pushed himself up, tucking his gun back into the waistband of his pants. “Yeah. I can do it.” With that, he hopped over the lip of their hiding place and walked down to meet Silver, Morph trailing behind him.

Kairi peeked over the edge again to watch the conversation from a distance, heart aching as she watched Silver’s warm expression melt into one of fury, voices raising as he stood to loom over Jim, who stood his ground, hands clenched into tight fists.

“Now mark me,” Silver thundered, his voice carrying in his anger, “either I get that map by dawn tomorrow, or so help me, I’ll use the ship’s cannons and blast you all to kingdom come.”

Jim stormed back towards them, expression dark as night, and when Kairi saw Silver pause a moment to look back, shoulders slumping slightly before resuming his limping pace, she felt a slight pain in her heart.

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Night had truly fallen, and Kairi turned away from the mouth of the hideaway, done with staring at the distant campfire and the sleeping pirates surrounding it.

Amelia’s injuries and attempts to push past them were beginning to take a toll on her, and her head lolled against the rocks, eyes rolling as she attempted to stay conscious. “We must,” she was saying, faint, “we must stay together and –”

Doctor Doppler began to panic, uselessness at taking care of the Captain’s injuries beginning to get to him, and as Jim placed a hand on his shoulder in comfort, Kairi felt her fingers twitch with how strongly she wanted to fix this, how a simple Cure could set everything back to right.

At just the thought she could hear Donald, shrieking in her ear about the Order, and she cringed backwards, clutching at her shoulder. Would it really count as disrupting the Order if it’s all a dream to them? She asked the imaginary Donald in her head. I need to do something. I have to.

“Jim, any thoughts at all?” B.E.N. was saying as she tuned back in, and Jim ran a weary hand over his face, heading to the entrance of their makeshift cave.

“Without the map, we’re dead,” he began, looking up at the faraway silhouette of the ship before turning to the distant campfire. “If we leave, we’re dead,” he continued, looking frustrated, “if we stay here –”
“We’re dead!” Morph finished for him in a squeaky voice, repeating it over and over. “We’re dead! We’re dead!”

They fell silent for a moment, and Kairi licked her lips, “well, when you put it like that, it sounds pretty hopeless.” Sighing heavily, Jim turned back to the lip of the entrance, leaning his arms on it as he hung his head.

Kairi didn’t really blame him, for feeling so lost; suddenly it was all on him to try and find a solution to all this. It doesn’t feel fair, she mused to herself, looking down at her Keyblade resting across her lap.

“…I think Jimmy could use a little quiet time,” B.E.N. whispered to Morph, “so I’m gonna just slip out the back door -”

Jim and Kairi perked up at that, the two of them looking up at B.E.N. with matching incredulous faces. “…Back door?” Jim finally asked, and B.E.N. perked up, heading towards a large metal dome.

“Yeah!” he said, pushing the sphere until a light began to shine through, Jim and Kairi scrambling forward to look into it, feeling a cool breeze brush against their faces, “I get this delightful breeze through here, which I think is important, because –”

Kairi’s mouth dropped open as she looked down, down, down, into a long mechanical tunnel, the walls roped with pipe and wires.

“What’s all this stuff?” Jim asked, stunned.

“The miles and miles of machinery that run through the entire course of the inside of this planet?” B.E.N. shrugged, “no idea.”

Astounded, they stared at each other. “I’m gonna try and get the map.” Jim finally said, and Kairi was already shaking her head. “Not by yourself! I’m going with you.”

“Kairi, you’re already hurt. It’s fine. B.E.N.’s coming, and Morph, too. They won’t even know we’re gone. Just – keep an eye on the Captain. Okay?”

Climbing up to stand over the hole, Jim called out, “Doc! I think I found a way out of here!”

“No, no no no, Jim, wait –” Doctor Doppler reached out a placating hand, still keeping the Captain propped up, “the Captain ordered us to stay –”

“I’ll be back!” And with that, Jim jumped down into the hole, Morph and B.E.N. following close behind, and he was gone.

“….woof.” the doctor sighed, exasperated, and Kairi snorted out a laugh, the noise filling up the echoing space.

“That boy,” Doctor Doppler huffed, “he’ll rush into a foolhardy plan headfirst before giving a second to really think. He’s going to get himself killed!! What on earth am I going to tell his poor mother –”
“Don’t worry,” Kairi quietly reassured him, pushing away from the secret entrance to sit next to Amelia, “Jim can do this. We’ve gotta believe in him and keep the pirates off his scent until he can get the map.”

As he let out a gusty sigh, Kairi leaned in to check on Amelia, “how is she now?”

Doctor Doppler looked down at their Captain, worry returning to crease his brow, “not great. Not better, but –”

He reached out, brushing her bangs out of her face, and she unconsciously turned into his hand, breathing labored.

“-her injuries are starting to get to her.” His expression was pained, “I don’t – there’s nothing I can do. Nothing at all. I – I’m a doctor, but not this kind of doctor.”

He looked so helpless, and Kairi’s stomach cramped with guilt; she couldn’t think of anything to say, any words that could placate him, and so she stayed quiet, words stuck in her throat as she twisted her fingers in her lap.

Slowly, time passed – ten minutes, twenty, and Kairi could feel the anxiety in the air increase the longer Jim was gone. Between them, their Captain groaned in pain, shifting in sleep, uncomfortable, and Kairi couldn’t bear it.

_Damn the Order, for once,_ she thought fiercely, picking up her Keyblade. Doctor Doppler looked up at her movements, eyes bugging slightly in alarm as she raised her blade above her head. “What on _earth_ are you –”

“*Heal.*”

The area around them glowed with light, and Kairi’s shoulders dropped as the throbbing in her shoulder faded away. Captain Amelia let out a shuddering sigh of relief, everything in her drooping as the pain receded, and her eyes slowly fluttered open.

Lowering her Keyblade, Kairi didn’t meet Doctor Doppler’s gobsmacked expression, turning to dig through the pack at her hip until she grabbed an Elixir, pulling the stopper with her teeth and draining it in one go.

“What –” he sputtered, “how did you – you just – what on _earth_ -?!?”

“Well,” Kairi smiled, brittle, “you all _were_ saying I was a witch. Remember?”

Amelia took in another deep breath, and Kairi’s smile warmed a bit. “She doesn’t have to be in pain,” she said softly, “not when I can do something about it.”

“Kairi…” Doctor Doppler's voice was awed as their Captain reached over to grab her wrist, slowly waking up, “thank you.” She squeezed her wrist, grateful, and the warmth she felt lit up her chest.

“Well,” a voice drawled behind her, “that was quite the light show, young miss.”

The warmth in Kairi’s chest quickly froze over with panic, and she whirled around, throwing her
Keyblade up in time to catch Silver’s hand, the collision lighting the air up between them with sparks. Silver looked down at her, his cybernetic eye glowing a furious, angry red, and Kairi’s heart fluttered in her chest at a terrified pace.

“Curious thing, I’ve seen,” Silver said, voice casual as his crew slunk in behind him, “I wake up in the middle of the night – leg pains, you understand – and what do I see?”

He bears down on her, trying to push her into the dirt, and Kairi shoves back with bared teeth, straining with the effort as she slowly pushes forward, onto her feet.

“My old eyes did see that my longboat had vanished! Curious thing, that, seeing how my whole crew is here and accounted for. So –” His red eye flashed, giving his anger away as he shoved at Kairi again with an easygoing smile, “where’s Jimbo gone off to with my boat, Miss Kairi?”

Her feet scraped across the ground, but Kairi pressed her lips into a thin line, saying nothing. At her silence, Silver’s easy smile melted into fury. “So, you’re ready to die for that whelp, is that it?!” he barked. “Because you will, young lass, I assure you – you and your skeleton crew won’t make it out of here alive unless you tell me where that boy has gone off with my map.”

“I won’t!” More sparks filled the air as Kairi shoved Silver away from her, his metal leg buckling from the sudden force. “I will stop you myself before you touch me,” she hissed, “or any of them. I won’t let you!”

She swung at him, sending Silver stumbling backwards, “does that treasure mean more to you than Jim’s life?!” she cried out, furious, “he trusted you, cared about you – was all of that really a lie?!”

Kairi stood in front of Amelia and Doctor Doppler, blocking them from view, and readied her Keyblade for another swing. Silver’s face was dark with anger, “don’t talk like you’re any better than I, you slip of a girl. This treasure –”

“– isn’t worth anything to me compared to the people I care about!!” She cut him off, spitting mad, “and if this treasure is worth more to you than that, then you’re a bigger idiot than I thought you were.”

A sharp cry echoed behind her, and Kairi turned to see one of Silver’s crew grab Amelia by the arm and yank her upwards, bending her arm behind her back. Doctor Doppler jerked against the arms binding him, eyes pleading as they shoved a gag in his mouth.

Lightning crackled across Kairi’s skin, “let them go!! Get your hands off -!”

Her head whipped to the side as Silver struck her, backhanding her across the face with his large metal hand. Stars burst across her vision, and Kairi crumpled to the floor as her Keyblade vanished with a flurry of light.

She could hear Amelia, swearing and cursing, but it sounded far away – muffled, like she was at the bottom of the sea. Kairi blinked slowly once, twice, everything around her fading until all she saw was the red glow of Silver’s eye.

Kairi blinked again, and everything went black.

-o-
“…you’re just like me, Jimbo…”

Kairi groaned quietly under her breath, eyes fluttering open as she woke. Her head spun, dark spots filling her vision, and she gently shook her head, trying to see. Her head ached, throbbing in time with the beat of her heart, and strands of her hair stuck to her hairline. As her vision cleared, Kairi quickly took in her surroundings, staring at Jim, arms pinned to his sides as Silver began to gloat, the spherical map clutched in his fist.

She was bound and gagged, wrists tied roughly behind her back, and sandwiched between Doctor Doppler and Amelia, who were shouting out muffled protests behind their gags.

Kairi drifted a little as she tried to feel her way around, fingers curling up towards the ropes binding her wrists, and she slowly began to pick at the knots with her nails. It was tight, certainly, but other than that, a sloppy knot at the end of the day; it’d take a minute, but she’d be able to loosen the ropes and get free.

From behind her gag, Kairi sucked on her teeth, disgusted; they could never beat the knots the fishermen tie at Destiny Islands.

The loud cock of guns brought Kairi back to focus as a gun was pointed in their direction, Silver looming over Jim as he glared back, defiant, map clutched in his hands. Kairi resumed picking at her ropes as Jim’s shoulders sagged a little in resignation, and he angrily began to unlock the map, green pinpricks of light zooming through the air and forming the shape of Treasure Planet, before dissolving and speeding outside, forming a fluorescent green line, showing them the way.

With a small slither of noise, the rope slid away from her wrists, and Kairi allowed herself a thrill of triumph as she discreetly rolled her wrists around before removing her gag, the returning blood flow making her fingers tingle.

“Tie him up, and leave him with the others until we –”

Jim wouldn’t have that, and the map retreated into his hands in a scattering of lights. “You want the map,” he said steadily as they gaped at him, outraged, “then you’re taking me, too.”

“And me.”

Shocked gasps rippled through the air as Kairi rose to her feet, stumbling a little, Keyblade already in hand. “I’m not letting you take Jim alone.” She scowled at Silver, her eyes burning, and took a few steps forward. She felt hands coming towards her in her peripheral vision, and Kairi swung her Keyblade around until the point was between their eyes, not looking away from Silver.

“Please don’t make me do this,” she begged softly, and she didn’t lower her blade until she felt the hands recede.

Silver’s eye flared red, but slowly melted back to placid gold as he shook his head with a chuckle. “We’ll take them all!” He snapped, and Jim shrugged away from the hands wrapped around his upper arms as he turned away, quickly making his way to Kairi.

“Kairi, hey!!” He reached her just as she stumbled, wrapping a hand around her arm so she wouldn’t fall. “Are you okay?! I come back and you’re knocked out and – you’re bleeding.”
“Mm?” She reached up, touching her hairline where the throbbing was strongest, and felt a pulse of irritation when her fingers came away red.

*Can you get concussions in the Sleeping Worlds?* She asked herself, wiping the blood away onto her pants. *Is this allowed?*

“It’s okay.” Kairi mumbled, leaning into Jim’s side a little, “I’m gonna be fine, don’t worry. It’s not too bad.” Jim’s face told her that he knew she was full of shit, but he kept it to himself, helping her onto the longboat. When Amelia and Doctor Doppler were shoved on, Kairi made sure to remove their gags, at the very least, giving the two of them an apologetic smile.

And then they were off, Jim pulled to the front of the longboat with Silver as they sped across the planet, following their acid green guideline. Eventually they stopped, and Silver pulled Jim out of the boat, urging his crew along. “We’re getting close, lads! I smell treasure awaitin’!”

With a loud belly laugh, Silver turned his arm into a sword and began to hack at the bramble in their way, making a path to continue following the light.

“Kairi, go,” Amelia hissed, “we’ll meet up again soon; do not leave Jim with them.”

Pursing her lips, Kairi nodded sharply, swinging out of the longboat to catch up with Jim. “I’ll see you soon,” she promised, and then moved her eyes to glare daggers at the few crewmates Silver left to watch them. Their guns were cocked, but they didn’t make any moves, not towards her – they wouldn’t be able to stop her, anyway.

Kairi broke through the makeshift path Silver had cut through just in time to see the crew in an uproar, the bright green line they were following leading them to – nothing.

“We should have never followed this boy!” one member crowed, hopping up to push Jim into the dirt, quickly surrounded by the remaining crew.

“Let’s rip his gizzards out right now!”

“Throw him off the cliff!”

Kairi never moved so fast in her life, shoving her way through the crowd and planting herself in front of Jim, Keyblade at the ready. “What is your problem?!” She screamed, just as the ground beneath her glowed a vibrant green, a loud humming filling the air.

Jim scrambled to his feet as thin green beams of light rose from the ground where he had placed the map, the light coming together to form its own round star chart. From the bottom of the cliff, a rumbling came as a bright beam of light shot from the ground, parting like a zipper as it continued into the clouds, showing them a swirling blue nebula.

“Oh, have mercy.” Kairi heard Silver murmur faintly, shocked, but she barely paid him any mind, struck dumb with the rest of the crew by what she was seeing.

“…a big door,” Jim murmured thoughtfully, “opening and closing.”

He touched another location on the map, and the scenery in the gateway changed into giant crystal islands in the sky, ships zooming between them. Another button, another change of scenery, until
Kairi saw the familiar crescent of the space port where she first landed.

“So that’s how Flint did it!” Jim said excitedly. “He used this portal to roam the universe stealing treasure!”

“But where did he stash it all?!” Silver pushed Jim to the side, beginning to frantically press at locations on the map. “Where’s the blasted treasure?!”

Near Jim, B.E.N. was starting to get stressed, “treasure…treasure!” He grasped at his wires, tugging them sharply, “it’s buried – buried in the -!”

“Buried in the centroid of the mechanism…” Jim completed, once again lost in thought, and Kairi could see it again, in her mind’s eye – the miles and miles of metal and wiring, running beneath the surface of the world.

“What if –” Jim looked up at Kairi, eyes bright, “what if the whole planet is the mechanism…and the treasure is buried in the center of the planet?!”

The crew went haywire at that suggestion, beginning to claw frantically at the ground, like if they dug far enough, they’d find the gold waiting for them beneath. Silver’s eye began to glow that angry red as he continued to randomly push buttons on the map, frustrated. “And how in the blue blazes are we supposed to get there?!”

Jim shouldered his way to the map, reaching out towards one point in the map, “just…open the right door.”

-0-

When Kairi stepped through the pathway into the heart of Treasure Planet, taking in the mountains of gold, two things happened simultaneously.

First, she felt Sora’s faint light touch her senses, closer than it’s been in months, but that first feeling was quickly overtaken by the wall of darkness that slammed into her, so strong that it made her curl over, retching, Keyblade falling from her hand and vanishing.

“Kairi??” She felt Jim’s hand at her back, “what’s wrong? What happened?”

“This is all seeming very familiar,” she heard B.E.N. say thoughtfully over her pounding heart, “can’t remember why –”

“Kairi?”

She shook her head, “I can’t – it feels wrong. It feels so wrong, here. We – we need to leave.”

Jim frowned at her, concerned, eyes darting to Silver who was walking through the mountains of treasure, awed. His eyes continued looking around the space, searching, and lit up when they landed on something to their left. “B.E.N., come on,” he said shortly, grabbing Kairi’s wrist, “we’re getting out of here. And we’re not going to leave empty handed.”

Quietly, despite B.E.N.’s whispered protests, he pulled Kairi along towards a longboat a short
distance away, filled to the brim with treasure, spindly, skeletal legs sticking out of the bottom of the boat, reminding her of a spider. She shivered but followed Jim as he helped her onto the boat, wrapping her arms around herself as Jim pulled B.E.N. onto the boat next.

“I can’t tell you how frustrating this is, Jimmy” the robot was saying as he was lifted up, “’cause there’s something just – nagging at the back of my mind –”

Whatever else he was going to say was cut off by his strangled yell and Kairi’s loud gasp as they turned and saw what was sitting on a throne atop a mound of gold.

“Captain Flint?!” Jim gasped, eyes wide.

“In the flesh! Well, s-sort of, except for skin, organs, or -”

The three of them crept closer, morbidly fascinated at what they saw. Sitting there, dressed in rags, were the skeletal remains of Flint, draped across his throne. His bony fingers were curled tight around something, and Kairi saw it catch Jim’s attention. From the dusty brim of Flint’s hat, Kairi watched a shiny purple spider descend from a thin web before crawling into one of the many empty sockets of Flint’s eyes, and she took a few steps back, thoroughly creeped out.

“– I remember there was something horrible that Flint didn’t want anyone else to know – but I just can’t remember what it was! Oh, a mind is a terrible thing to lose!!” B.E.N. sobbed loudly into his hands, and if Kairi wasn’t so tense, she would’ve found it funny, somehow.

“B.E.N.,” Jim said, prying something out of Flint’s skeletal hand, “I think I just found your mind. Hold still.”

The robot squawked as Jim grabbed him, holding a piece of metal shaped to the empty gap in the back of B.E.N.’s head. “Woah!” B.E.N. gasped as the wires connected, the missing circuit clicking into place, and his eyes flashed from a sickly green to a vibrant blue. The robot blinked, “y’know, Jimmy, I was just thinking – I was just think –”

His eyes brightened in realization, “it’s- it’s all flooding back! My memories!” His voice picked up in speed, going faster and faster, like his thoughts would vanish again before he got to tell it all. “Right up until Flint pulled my memory circuits so I could never tell anybody about his – booby trap!!”

High above them, there was a loud crash, the ground beneath them beginning to rumble violently as structures around them began to explode.

“Flint wanted to make sure that nobody could ever steal his treasure,” B.E.N. continued, more explosions rocking across the planet, “so he rigged this planet to blow higher than a Kalepsian kite!”

One of the long, metal protrusions littered across the planet tumbled to the ground from the explosions, cutting into the metal, and the giant purple laser it was supposed to catch began to cut into the core of the planet, the screams of Silver’s remaining crew echoing in Kairi’s ears.

“B.E.N., take Kairi!” Jim dove beneath the control panel of the longboat, “you two go back and help Captain and the Doc! If I’m not there in five minutes, leave without me!”
“What?!” Kairi gaped down at Jim in outrage as B.E.N. tripped forward, grabbing Jim’s legs and pulling him from under the control panel, “I am not leaving my buddy Jimmy!”

Whatever look Jim was giving him as he was pulled from the control panel quickly made B.E.N. scoot backwards, waving his hands, “unless he looks at me like that. Bye, Jim! Let’s go, little miss!”

“Excuse me, I – no! Jim, I am not leaving!”

“It’s not safe!”

“Oh, but it’s safe for you?! No! I’m not leaving you here to just blow up on some – some rigged planet!!”

The darkness that Kairi was trying her hardest to ignore rose up, making nausea rise behind her teeth as faint whispers began to fill her ears. A violent chill raced down her back, making her stop short, and her Keyblade was in her hand before she could even think about it, senses going hyper focused.

“Kairi, you have to go –”

“Shut up!!” She hissed, eyes darting around, “that – do you hear that?!”

“Hear what? The sounds of the planet exploding??”

“No, the – the-”

A whispery voice was filling her mind, growing louder and louder with every passing second, and Kairi’s heart slammed against her ribs.

‘mine...mine...the treasure…’

Jagged, cracking noises were starting up behind her, where she knew Flint’s remains sat, and she was almost too scared to turn around and face whatever was happening, her Keyblade trembling in her grasp.

‘you cannot have it…you’ll die before you take it from me…’

The longboat sputtered to life beneath her feet, and Kairi was grateful for it; at least one of us will be able to get out of here she thought, as the heavy weight of darkness increased at her back.

“Jim,” she said through numb lips, “you get out of here, alright? Promise me.”

‘you won’t have it –’ the cracking behind her increased, and Kairi let her eyes flutter closed for just a second.

“What are you saying? We’re going to get out together –” Jim wriggled from under the control panel of the longboat rising to his feet, and Kairi watched his face pale as he took in whatever was standing behind her.

The whispers grew in volume, rising until it sounded like hissed screams, making Kairi’s ears ring.
‘you’ll die here….you’ll die before you take what’s mine –’

“Promise me, Jim,” she said loudly, speaking over the voice, “take the longboat and go. Okay? I’ll be right behind you.”

“How about you, Jim?” she said, her voice tiny and distant, “stay here. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Kairi.” Jim said blankly, eyes still locked on whatever was rising at her back, “no. No, we can go now, together, let’s –”

‘YOU’LL DIE BEFORE YOU TAKE IT.’

She was moving before she could even register the thought, bringing her Keyblade up in time to block the strike of whatever monster had formed behind them. She could feel bone, razor sharp, slip through her defense, and set her jaw as it sliced across her cheek, blood quickly pooling as the skin split.

Kairi didn’t look away from the empty sockets of Flint, planting her feet into the deck of the longboat and shoving him away with all her strength. The remains of his humanoid corpse had shifted, changed, the gaping, elongated bones of his ribcage melding into the skeletal legs of a spider. Skeletal hands, sharp as daggers, clawed into the wood, fangs clicking, clicking, as it stared her down.

Realization jolted through her as she remembered that spider, shiny and sickly purple, crawling into Flint’s eye, and she knew what she needed to do. “Five minutes, right? I’ll hold this thing off so you can go.”

“Kairi –”

“Jim.” She made sure to fill her voice with confidence, unable to turn and give him the reassuring smile she wanted. “I need you to trust me. I can handle this. Get out of here, okay? I’ll see you soon.” To her Dream Eater, faithfully wrapped around her neck, she gave it a pat, “stay here with me, alright? I’ve gotta be fast, so I need you close.”

It chirped in what Kairi was going to take as acquiescence, and she took a deep breath, steeling herself.

She didn’t look back, she couldn’t, and with a loud cry, she sprinted towards this Nightmare, jamming her Keyblade into one of the gaps between its ribs and throwing them off the edge of the longboat onto the piles of gold below.

Piles that were rapidly diminishing, falling into large gaps created by the lasers above, melting away in the rivers of fire below.

The sight of the treasure, rapidly falling away, filled Kairi with fear as she rolled to her feet; she felt Sora here, somewhere among these piles and piles of treasure – if she didn’t move quickly, she would lose that part of him forever. *I have to reach him,* she thought desperately, stretching out her senses as the Nightmare struck, moving fast – too fast, suddenly in her space in the blink of an eye. It swiped at her with its claws, neck elongating to an unnatural length as it prepared for a bite.

Dodging its claws, Kairi put her Keyblade up in time to block its bite and the fangs sparked against the metal, hissing and spitting as it raged at her. A light touch against her senses pulled her focus away, and she could feel him, keenly – Sora, fifty feet away and getting further as heaps of treasure rolled closer and closer to the edge.
With that and the oncoming destruction of the planet, Kairi did not have time to mess around – she needed to grab Sora’s fragment and take this Nightmare out, fast.

Gritting her teeth, she yanked her Keyblade out of the Nightmare’s jaws and struck it across the face, adding a solid kick to its chest to move it further away from her. She felt something crack beneath her heel, and the Nightmare retreated, hissing, empty eyes burning. Lifting her Keyblade, she called down Thunder and turned, sprinting away as it screamed, bony legs curling up beneath it as it shook with electricity.

_Faster,_ she urged herself, legs pumping as she flew over the roiling piles of gold, stumbling here and there at the tenuous terrain but refusing to fall. _Faster!!!_

She was so _close_; she could feel him, she could _feel him_, and she just needed to grab –

A scream caught her attention, made her pause, and she looked back to see Silver, looking torn as he held onto the side of the longboat, still filled with treasure, watching as Jim dangled helplessly over a cliff a few feet away.

“Get him out of here,” she whispered, shocked, before lifting her voice, raising it to a scream, “get him out of here!! Damn the treasure, Silver, get him ou –”

Her voice lodged in her throat as her body jerked forward, fading into a quiet gurgle. Her dragon screamed in her ear, and Kairi looked down in disbelief at the long, bony protrusions, slick and red, sticking out of her abdomen.

_Don’t let them see this_, she thought blankly, her knees threatening to give out on her, _don’t let Jim see this. He’s gotta keep thinking I’m alright._

If he tried to come and help her, he would die.

She wouldn’t let herself fall, staying upright through sheer willpower, and Kairi forced herself to move quickly, pulling herself away from the Nightmare’s elongated spidery talons with a quiet whimper.

In the distance, another explosion ripped across the sky, the force of the blast so strong it rocked the ground beneath Kairi’s feet, making her stumble. She was running out of time; she had to find that piece of Sora and end this.

_I’ll go big, then_, she decided, pressing a hand to her stomach. _Big and loud it is._ Decision made, she blocked another strike from the Nightmare, quickly sending back a few hits of her own to lop off some of it’s spider – like legs, the bones falling to the ground with a clatter. Its screams echoed loudly across the space, and Kairi turned her back on the beast and ran, digging through her expansive pack to down a Potion to regain some of her strength before the Nightmare was on her again.

Sora was so close now, she was almost in tears, and her eyes darted around the diminishing treasure, trying to find him before it was too late, and – there.

_There._

At the top of a rolling mound of treasure – a wayfinder.
Kairi’s wayfinder.

Heading closer and closer to the edge.

*I have to make it.* The frantic thought was repeating through her head, making her kick off into a full sprint towards the edge. *I have to make it!!! Stop. Stop!!*

“**Stop!!**”

She didn’t even raise her Keyblade, but she could feel the spell cast, the magic so strong it made the air ripple. Explosions still rocked the cavern, and Kairi could hear the skittering steps of the Nightmare behind her, getting closer and closer every second, but that spot – that one spot.

It wasn’t moving. She stopped it. She *stopped* it.

She didn’t even *know* she could *do that*, and grateful tears filled her eyes as she scrambled towards the fragment, not sure when she’d fallen to her hands and knees, but taking care to move as quickly as possible, scooping the fragment up with her free hand before the spell wore off.

It was just as warm as the others, so *warm*, and she pressed it to her lips, so grateful, using it to bolster her strength for one good spell to blow this Nightmare away. By the time she opened her eyes, the Nightmare rushing at her was glowing, molten silver, so bright it hurt to look at her. *I will do this,* she claimed, resolute. *I will destroy this Nightmare. I will get Sora home.*

She couldn’t see Jim or Silver anywhere, and she was glad for it, hoped that meant they were gone and safe from this crumbling planet. *Hopefully I’ll be gone, too,* she thought, pointing her Keyblade to the sky. *I’ll make sure of it.*

Her Faith was blinding, exploding outwards into blinding pillars of light even as the Nightmare caught her in the chest, sending the two of them careening over the edge.

Time seemed to slow, a bit, as she watched the Nightmare bearing down on her slowly crumble away, bit by bit, the deformed skeleton of Flint curling away into ash. Explosions filled the air, the sky turned orange from the flames, and through the smoke and melted metal, Kairi saw it – the faintest glowing outline of a Keyhole.

Having the Sleeping Keyhole be in a place rigged to destruction, where a man’s darkness festered so much it was able to stretch across galaxies – it was odd.

*I’m sorry, Jim.* Kairi thought as she pointed her Keyblade at the keyhole, *I guess we won’t get to see each other again after all.*

Part of her hopes it feels like a scattered, misplaced memory – a bad dream he just couldn’t shake off.

A beam of light shot out of the end of her Keyblade, and the last thing Kairi heard before the world burst into flames was the echoing *’click’* of the Keyhole.

And then she didn’t know anything else.
Chapter End Notes

AAAAAAAAND YEAH. REALLY HOPE THIS WAS OKAY. THREE DOWN TWO TO GO.

I'm incapable of making the nightmares out into these cutesey punny boss battles. I've tried but they just turn into something scary instead.

random 1am fun fact, but every time I think of the packs Kairi and Roxas are using to store their stuff I keep picturing cute little bags of holding. just. every time. 'cause they have so much shit in the games like are you kidding me. they've got bags of holding.

I'll get to chapter 8 eventually but for now I'm going to blerdcon this weekend and I'm gonna fuckin party. because I deserve.

and now I'm going to SLEEP!

comments and kudos are appreciated! I hope this was okay. y'all have a good weekend!
hello demons, it's me, ya girl

this....this one was a struggle. honestly I still don't feel super confident in this chapter. but she tried and that's what counts!!! my god did I try.

this world really tried the fuck outta me 'cause I was stuck on what I wanted to do!! after three chapters of Big Boss Combat I was getting a little burnt out so I just. needed to do something a little differently this time.

while I was thinking I decided to start this chapter off with a little self indulgent moment so hope y'all like that.

world four! let's jump in!

unbeta'd once again, everything edited by me to the best of my abilityyyyy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kairi.”

Fingers gently brushed across her forehead, pushing her bangs out of her face, and Kairi whined, turning away from the touch. “Noooo.” She complained, “I don’t want to get up yet. Just another minute.”

Quiet laughter reached her ears. “Just as lazy as Sora,” the voice teased, so achingly familiar that Kairi’s eyes snapped open without her realizing it, and she stared up into Riku’s amused eyes. “How I was able to get anything done with you two around is a miracle.”

He smiled at her, the smile that made his nose crinkle in the way she loved to pieces, and she was so happy to see him that she instantly teared up. “Riku?” she whimpered, tears clinging to her lashes as she reached up to touch him, to make sure he was truly there. “Is this real? Are you really here?”

Her head was resting in his lap, and she could distantly hear the lull of the waves of Destiny Islands, feel the warm winds brushing over them. Kairi’s stomach dropped, terrified that she’d failed, that she somehow ended up back home, empty handed. Riku grabbed her hand, pressing it to his cheek, and his smile sent her worry scattering.

“This is a dream, isn’t it?” Her voice wobbled, “you’re not actually here, not really. My brain just made all this up ‘cause I miss you so much.”

“Kairi,” Riku said, jokingly admonishing, “we’re Keyblade wielders. You should know by now that we have weird dreams.”

“So you –”
“It’s really me.” He assured her, “I’m here.”

Kairi had sat up and threw herself into his arms before he even finished his sentence.

She hooked her arms around his neck as Riku scooped her up, carefully placing her down into the cradle of his folded legs as she pressed a sloppy kiss on the curve of his cheek, shoving her face into his neck. The ends of his hair tickled her nose, and she could smell him – sun and salt and home, and she missed him so much it was stupid, tears finally breaking free and soaking into his shirt.

“Riku!!” she wept, “Riku, you’re here!! This better not be a joke or – or I’m gonna break up with you!! I mean it!!”

“Kairi.” Riku couldn’t help but laugh, “you’re gonna start doubting your dreams here? Now?? Come on, don’t cry. We don’t have much time.”

“How did you even find me?” She sniffled, sitting back far enough to let Riku cup her face in his hands, gently wiping her tears away with his thumbs. “I’m so far, I know it, I know I am – how did you even -?”

“Maybe there’s a little Dream Eater left in me.” He laughed at the face she made, pinching her nose as she puffed her cheeks out at his answer. “Honestly, Kairi - we shared a paopu, remember? It definitely counted.”

He pressed a finger against his breastbone before drawing a finger like there was an invisible string, tying them together, and tapped his finger against the center of her chest. “We’re always connected, now. You and me. I can find you anywhere.”

That made her lip start wobbling again, and Riku huffed a laugh as he swiped at the new tears gathering in her eyes. “No crying.” He scolded gently, “come on, let me look at you really quick.”

Kairi leaned back further, letting him look over her, taking in any new scars and bruises. “Your hair got longer,” he absently noticed, and she nodded, still sniffling. “Yeah. I was on a pirate ship for three months.”

“Three mo -?! What?!”

“Yeah. And they were space pirates. I’ve almost died, like, three times.”

Riku paled a little at the mention of that, and Kairi smiled, reassuring. “I’m fine! I handled it. I’ll tell you all about it,” she promised, winding her arms around him and worming back into his space. “Not now, though. I really, really miss you, Riku.”

She was by herself in that world for what felt like ages, and she has no idea if she’s going to wake up alone again in a strange new world. It was horribly lonely.

If this was all the contact Kairi was going to get from her loved ones, then she was going to soak in every second.
Riku’s hand smoothed down her back, his cheek resting in the curve of her neck. “I miss you, too.” He said, quietly, “I’m holding it down, here. Me and Aqua. No matter what happens in your exam, you’re safe from any outside influences, I promise.”

Kairi believed him – of course she did; she knew from the start that she was safe as anything, with Riku watching over her.

The soft hum of Destiny Islands hummed around her, and Kairi felt keenly homesick; she missed her friends, missed her family – she wanted this exam to be over as soon as possible.

“This exam has been a lot harder than I expected.” She quietly admitted, rubbing the sleeve of Riku’s shirt between her fingers. “And lonely. Roxas and I have been split up for most of it.”

“I understand.” He shifted in his sitting position, hitching Kairi’s legs more comfortably over one of his knees. “Sora and I were split up for our entire exam. I didn’t see him again until –”

He paused for a moment, remembering. “Until, well….you know.”

“Yeah. I remember.” Closing her eyes, Kairi leaned against Riku’s shoulder, and the two of them fell silent, watching the tide pull in and out from the shore. Still rubbing his sleeve between her fingers, Kairi silently peeked up from under her lashes to look at Riku, taking in the curve of his jaw and the peaceful tilt to his mouth.

When she saw the dark circles smudged under his eyes, Kairi’s lips turned in disapproval. “Riku,” she said, letting her displeasure show. “You look tired. Have you been sleeping?”

His eyes drifted down to look at her before sliding away, an obvious sign of guilt. “I mean,” he hedged, “I’m sleeping right now, aren’t I? How else would I be able to reach you?”

“Riku.”

He practically wilted at her voice, shoulders drooping as she moved, making him unfold his legs so she could rise onto her knees, able to really look him in the eyes.

“Hey.” Her tone softened as she cupped his cheek, using her free hand to brush his hair away, “you have to take care of yourself, too. Do you think you’ll be able to watch over me and Roxas and make sure no one interferes if you never sleep?”

“I know,” he said, abashed, “I just – I worry. Not that I don’t think you can do this or anything!” He’d gripped her shoulders when he said that, rushing to reassure her that he didn’t doubt her skills, and then sighed, hands sliding down her arms to grab her hands. Riku laced their fingers together and stared down at their joined hands, lips pursed.

“I’m always going to worry about you,” he softly admitted to their hands. “I can’t help it. I worry about everyone I lo – everyone I care about. It’s just how I am.”

Kairi caught his cut off admission, and she smiled at it, a warm feeling pooling in her chest, gooey and stupid. All this time, and he still couldn’t say it - but she knew. Riku stared at the smile spreading across her face and he nervously wiggled in place, tugging at their joined hands.

“What?”
“Nothing,” she sang happily, rocking forward on her knees to lean in and place a kiss on Riku’s mouth – one on his upper lip, another on his bottom lip, light and soft as anything. Kairi opened her eyes just in time to watch Riku blush deep as a rose, and she took it in with a pleased smile. “I just love you. That’s all.”

Saying it was as easy as breathing, as simple as stating basic facts about the worlds. The skies are blue, sometimes. There are as many Worlds as there are stars in the sky. Kairi loves Riku and Sora with all her heart.

It was worth watching Riku’s eyes light up at her words, though the romance of it all was ruined by Kairi yawning in his face.

“Cute,” he laughed, nose wrinkling. “I guess our time is up.”

“But I don’t want to,” she said, petulant, squeezing his hands and shoving her forehead against his. “I want to stay here for a little while longer.”

“You’ve gotta get back to your exam. You have people to help. Worlds to restore, you know?”

“I guess.” It was getting harder and harder to keep her eyes open, and Kairi’s eyes fluttered, blearily keeping her focus on Riku.

“I’ll be home soon,” she promised, sleepily rubbing her cheek against Riku’s. “And I’ll have Sora with me. I’ll try and be quick – I know you two are completely hopeless without me.”

“We are,” Riku agreed, his voice sounding far away, “we couldn’t go on without you, you know that.”

“Mm.”

She couldn’t see Destiny Islands anymore, the sunlight growing brighter and brighter until it was all she could see, until it was blinding, and she shoved her face into Riku’s shoulder, finally giving into the urge to close her eyes. “I’ll sleep,” she mumbled into Riku’s shirt. “Just for a minute.”

“Okay.” Riku’s voice was so distant now, she had to strain her ears to catch it. “Sleep well, Kairi. I’ll see you in a bit.”

-o-

Bright sunlight cut across her eyes, and Kairi groaned loudly, throwing an arm over her face.

“I don’t wanna,” she whined loudly to the open air, “I’m not ready.”

The world didn’t seem to care too much about whether she was ready or not, the only answer she received being the rustle of the leaves and more bright sun in her face.
“Ugh.” Groaning at the top of her lungs, Kairi rolled onto her side and pushed herself onto her feet, not caring who heard her complaining. The wayfinder was still clutched tightly in her hand, and Kairi blindly stowed it away, still blinking sunlight out of her eyes.

The weight of her Dream Eater around her neck was absent, which was worrying, and she raised her arm to block out the sun and take in her surroundings. She didn’t get very far, though, freezing in place when she saw her arm.

Her very fur-covered arm, the ends of her hands—fur-covered hands, she noted hysterically—tipped with sharp claws.

“Oh,” she said faintly, “oh, I’m about to freak out.”

“-iii! Kairiiii, is that you?!”

Something twitched at the top of her head at that voice—Kairi refused to believe it was her ears—and her eyes automatically welled up, relieved. “Roxas?” she whimpered, taking a few steps towards his voice, “is that you? Roxas!!”

She called out in the direction she heard his voice and got the rapid snaps of twigs and foliage in response before a golden blur burst from the bushes.

Kairi didn’t know whether to laugh or scream as Roxas appeared, Keyblades in hand, dressed in a cream tunic and looking every inch the pissed cat she’d teased about him before, ruffed fur around his neck puffed in aggression. He looked kind of like a lynx, pointed ears swiveling back and forth as he looked for any threat before focusing on Kairi, his eyes widening a little as he took her in.

“Roxas,” Kairi said calmly, “I’m about to freak out.”

He blinked, confused, “freak out—Kairi. Kairi, are you not used to your appearance changing?”

“How do you get used to that?!” she squeaked, “I’m kinda used to my clothes changing, but—but my whole—?!” She gestured wildly to her entire person, eyes wide, “I don’t even know what I look like!!”

“You…look like a cat in a dress.”

“That’s—a cat? That’s it?”

“Am I supposed to know what kind?! You just look like a cat. And how come you’re about to freak out?!! Didn’t Riku take you to places where your form changes?”

“I mean—yeah, but—I just—!” Kairi bristled, looking down at her furry hands, at the pale pink gown she was wearing, a small, very familiar dragon sneakily embroidered at the bottom of the bodice. “It’s just been a long day.” She finished in a whisper, hands curling into fists.

She looked up at Roxas’ soft touch on her arm. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, “while we figure out where we need to go? We can’t stay in these woods forever.”

“I know. Yeah. Okay.”
Roxas gently took her hand and began to lead her through the woods, and as they walked, Kairi told him about her time on the R.L.S. Legacy, and the voyage to Treasure Planet. “You were there for three months?” Roxas marveled, “that’s insane. I was only in my world for a few weeks, max. Pushing close to a month.”

“What was your world like?”

Kairi listened attentively to Roxas’ story about his time with a pair called Basil and Doctor Dawson, and his role in helping them stop a man named Rattigan and the Nightmare in his control. “This isn’t the first time I’ve had to deal with a form change,” he admitted, “in that world, we were all mice the whole time.”

“Mice!! You had to deal with that all tiny?”

“It’s not all bad.”

“And…did you find it? Your –”

“Yeah. Did you?”

Kairi scoffed, “oh god, barely. It was on this planet filled with treasure, and the guy who put all the treasure there rigged the whole place to explode if anyone found it. I was seconds from being blown up when I’d found it!!”

Roxas’ mouth dropped open as they made their way through the trees, saying nothing as he stared at her in shock. “I know,” she said, solemn, “it was very intense.”

“You have got to tell me everything about that world.” Roxas looked around, brow wrinkling, “as soon as we figure out where we need to go. This world can’t be all forest, can it -?”

He suddenly stopped short, ears swiveling forward as he focused in on whatever noise that caught his attention. “Roxas?” Kairi grabbed his arm, senses quickly going alert, “what is it? What’s happening?”


“Let’s go!” She pushed Roxas forward a little, “you can hear it, right? Lead the way!”

Roxas nodded sharply, and the two of them broke into a run, heading in the direction where he heard the noises. As they got closer, Kairi could hear it too – the shouts, the clang of swords and high, nasally cries – “kill him!! Kill him!!”

What is going on?? Kairi thought wildly as they burst through the foliage, stumbling directly into a tournament ground writhing with chaos. Figures were darting wildly across the area, dodging the many large guards that were chasing after them, weapons drawn. A handful of people were standing on the edges, holding children back and yelling encouragements at a – a fox, dressed in green, another fox in a purple gown pressed close behind him as he blocked a sword strike from one of the guards.

There was so much happening in the space that Kairi didn’t know where to look, the messy jumble of noise and movement overwhelming.
It was a lot, and as her eyes danced around, Kairi noticed some of the guards were – off. They moved faster than their comrades, their strikes too fierce; their armor was different, a pitch black with a sickly purple sheen, so different from the silver armor of the others, large lizard – like tails twitching with their movements, and it made Kairi’s hair stand on end.

“Roxas,” she hissed, “there are Nightmares, here. We’ve gotta do something!”

“We’ll be pretty obvious if we do,” he mumbled, “no turning back.” But his hands betrayed his reluctance, clenching into fists, ready to summon his Keyblades.

“But that’s why we’re here, right?” Kairi didn’t hesitate to call Destiny’s Embrace into her hand, “stop the Nightmares, save the world –”

“Make sure you don’t almost die for the fourth time,” his voice was flat as Oathkeeper and Oblivion came to him, but his eyes were teasing, and Kairi elbowed him sharply in the side.

“Oh, like you have room to talk! Now, come on!”

A swarm of guards rushed by them, chasing after a hen in a blue gown, giving them the cover they needed to slip into the fray. Their attempt at stealth didn’t last long, voices rising at two newcomers with strange weapons running into the chaotic field.

“What the – what are you kids doing out here?!” The loud, rumbly voice came from a large bear, dressed in a garishly ridiculous costume, fighting against one of the Nightmares with only a dagger. “You two get outta here, if you mess around, you’re gonna get hurt –”

He extended his arm, trying to keep them away, but Kairi ducked under his arm, quick and evasive, and smiled when the Nightmare vanished into wisps of smoke with two strikes.

She was getting a lot better at this.

“All good?” She called to Roxas over her shoulder, Keyblade at the ready; their entrance gained the attention of the other Nightmares scattered across the field, and they had begun to head towards them with rapid steps.

“I’m good!” Roxas called back, spinning his Keyblades with a flourish after taking out two more of the Nightmares rushing at them, skipping over to stand at Kairi’s back. By now the bear was staring at them in open-mouthed disbelief; even the guard he was fighting with was gaping at them, their previous battle forgotten.

“Little John!” the fox called out, “we’ve gotta get the townspeople out of here, now!”

“On it, Rob!” Little John yelled back, flipping the dagger in his hand to slam the butt of it between the eyes of the guard, sending him tumbling to the ground. “Now, I don’t know where you two kids came from,” he began, turning to face them, “but you’ve still gotta get out of here with the rest of us. This is dangerous stuff, you –”

“Okay.” Kairi agreed easily as Roxas fired off two Blizzard spells, freezing a few Nightmares in place. “We’ll follow you – just show us where and we’ll –”

“Witches!! Traitors to the crown!! Guards!! Seize them!! Seize them!!”
“Ooh, Prince John’s definitely riled up now,” Little John muttered darkly, “alright, kiddos, time to go!”

Kairi had just struck out with her Keyblade at another Nightmare that got close to them, and she was only able to knock its helmet off, exposing its scaly, chameleon green face, because Little John had chosen that moment to scoop her and Roxas up under each arm.

Kairi was so shocked at this turn of events that she just froze, hanging limp in his grasp, Keyblade disappearing with her surprise, and in the corner of her eye she could see Roxas in the same predicament, bristling in indignation.

‘What.’ Kairi mouthed silently as Little John began to run, dodging the grasps of guards and Nightmares alike as he made his way towards the forest. ‘What.’

“Got the kids!” Little John called out, “we’ve gotta move, let’s go! Get a move on, Miss Kluck!”

“That’s Lady Kluck to you, laddie!” the hen in blue called out, jumping up and slamming one of the guards rushing her into the dirt.

“Rob, grab Maid Marian and get outta here!!” Kairi could see the other townsfolk at the edge of the tournament grounds scattering, running for the forest, the adults quickly ushering the children away to safety.

“Long live King Richard!!” She heard Lady Kluck call out before whooping at the top of her lungs, and Little John sighed, hitching Kairi further under his arm to free his hand in time to grab Lady Kluck by the collar and yank her into the safety of the woods, the rapid ‘thunk’ of arrows landing where she was standing just seconds ago. And then they were embraced by the forest, Little John running with them tucked under his arms for a few more minutes before slowing to a stop.

“Okay, kids,” he huffed, “I think it’s safe to put you down now. Think you can walk from here?”

“Yes.” Roxas stressed, “we can walk. We’ll follow you wherever you’re going. Thanks.”

Kairi snorted with laughter as Little John muttered, “well alright then,” gently placing them on their feet. Roxas straightened his tunic, still slightly affronted at being taken away from what would’ve been an easy fight, and Kairi took in the surroundings, the townsfolk ushered further into the forest.

“What’s going on around here?” She asked, and when she looked up, Little John was staring hard at them, hands on his hips. “…Now I definitely know you two aren’t from around here.” He finally said, beginning to lead them further into the woods. “How could you not know anything about old Prince John back there?”

“We’re…from pretty far away.” Kairi vaguely admitted, looking down at her hands.

“I didn’t see this Prince John guy, but I definitely heard him.” Roxas admitted, “how could you not? He sounds kinda pathetic – I thought princes are supposed to be….prince-ly.”

“You’re right about that!” The two of them turned towards the new voice and were greeted by a kindly looking badger in friar’s robes. “Friar Tuck,” he’d greeted, smiling at them, “I couldn’t help but overhear, I apologize.”
“It’s fine. So, what, is Prince John not the actual, uh…leader, or something?”

“Or something.” Friar Tuck nodded, “see, the only monarch we’ll answer to is King Richard; he’s the actual ruler of this land, and much better suited for it than Prince John! But one day, we heard that King Richard decided to leave for the Crusades, and in his absence, his younger brother took the throne.”

“And he’s been a real piece of work ever since.” Little John spoke up, scowling, “he’s been wringing towns dry with the taxes he’s put on us – we’re lucky if we can afford to eat. He’s been on some royal tour, and we were his next stop – little Nottingham. Prince John rolled right on in with his greed, and those weird folks guarding them came with him.”

Roxas’ frown had deepened as their explanation went on, and Kairi placed a hand over her heart, troubled. “That sounds horrible!” she exclaimed, “how are people supposed to live like that, if they can’t even get enough money for food?!”

“Aah, we’ve made do.” Little John puffed up proudly, “Rob and I, we’ve been helping out when we can by, ah – borrowing from the rich’s overflowing coffers, now and then.”

“Rob -?”

“Robin Hood!”

Kairi jumped a little at the new, tiny voice, and looked down at the small newcomer that decided to join them – a small rabbit, dressed in a blue tunic, tightly clutching a bow and wearing a green cap that was much too large for them. “Oh, hi! Robin Hood, that’s his name?”

“I guess.” The rabbit shrugged, “he’s really cool, and nice, and he can shoot real well – he got me this bow for my birthday!”

He held up the bow proudly, and Kairi made sure to ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ appropriately over it, grinning. “I’m Skippy,” he said as he stowed the bow away, “what’s your names?”

“Wow, we never did introduce ourselves, huh!” She looped an arm around Roxas’ elbow, pulling him in, “I’m Kairi! And this is my friend Roxas!” Roxas waved at her introduction, giving Skippy a small smile, and he looked between the two of them, squinting.

“Are you two sweethearts like Robin Hood and Maid Marian?”

Roxas bristled, and Kairi sputtered with embarrassment, “wha -?! No way!! We’re definitely not -!”

“Gross,” Roxas muttered, “Kairi’s like a weird annoying sister, there’s no way I’d like her like that!”

She nodded rapidly at his words, more touched than offended, and Skippy looked pleased. “Oh! Cool. Sweethearts are gross, anyway. Are you really witches, like Prince John was yelling about? I saw you do magic.”

Roxas was blinking rapidly at the whiplash of the child’s questions, and Kairi’s mouth fell open, wondering how to properly answer that. Lucky for them, Friar Tuck swooped in, saving them from their plight, “Skippy, don’t scare the newcomers off with all these questions- go on, now, go find
your mother and your siblings."

“But Friar Tuck, it was *magic* —”

“Skippy.”

At his tone, Skippy went off to rejoin his family and small group of friends, pouting deeply, and Roxas’ shoulders dropped in relief, Kairi sighing at the averted crisis. “Forgive him,” Friar Tuck laughed, “children always go for the hard-hitting questions right away, don’t they?”

“Alright, folks,” Little John called out, making his way to the front of the scattered group, “it probably isn’t safe to head back to town right away, but I’ve got a spot we can go to while things cool off, alright? Everyone stay close.”

-o-

It was creeping closer to sunset as Little John led the people of Nottingham through the forest to a large waterfall, guiding the people one by one to the cave that laid behind it. “Where did Robin Hood go?” Kairi asked quietly as they traversed through the damp cave, “I saw him, for a moment, at that place, but I haven’t seen him since.”

“Me neither,” Roxas agreed, “do you think he’s okay?”

“He’s fine.” Little John assured them as they passed, “last I saw, he’d escaped with Maid Marian; they’re probably taking the slow way here, catching up on lost time.”

“Oh, so Skippy was serious about them being sweethearts?”

They exited the cave, and entered a decently sized clearing, a clothesline stretched between two trees and a large cooking pot at the center, surrounded by a few logs. Everyone was spreading out, finding a spot in their temporary hiding place to sit down and rest, and Kairi and Roxas chose one of the logs surrounding the cooking pot, watching Little John attentively as he knelt to start a fire.

“Oh, yeah, he was serious about that one.” Sparks filled the air as the fire slowly grew, and Little John sat back on his heels with a sigh, “yeah, Rob and Maid Marian were real close, when they were young. One day, Maid Marian just up and left, and she came back a little before Prince John and his…little entourage.”

He scowled, and Kairi pulled her legs in close, placing her chin on her knees. Heaving himself to his feet, Little John made his way towards a small smattering of supplies a few feet away, reaching into a barrel to pull out a couple handfuls of vegetables.

“How long has it been like this?” Roxas asked when he returned, using his dagger to cut the tops off a few tomatoes and dicing them before adding them to the cooking pot, settling down to start peeling some potatoes. “What, old Prince John being in charge? Only a handful of months. But if you’re talking about Nottingham, he’s only been here a few weeks.”

“And those things came with him.” Kairi piped in, wanting confirmation for what she already knew, “those monsters.”
“Yes.” Friar Tuck took a seat on the log next to Kairi, face grim. “We thought they were just a regular part of the guard, until the came through town with the Sheriff. Those things, they—they’re not right. They don’t—move right, they’re so strong…one of them hurt Otto, our blacksmith, during a collection day.”

Friar Tuck gestured to a tall dog wearing a red apron, one of his legs encased in a cast, leaning on his crutch as he laughed at something his companion said, a rooster with a mandolin strapped to his back.

“Rob and I have had a few of our own close calls with them as well,” Little John said as he tossed his last potato into the cookpot, moving on to the carrots. “They’re faster than anything I’ve ever seen and you two just—”

He swung the carrot in his hand around, “—bam! Like it was nothing, took ‘em out just like that!”

“Oh, well—” Roxas coughed, flustered, as Kairi squirmed in place, looking at her hands, “—we just….we’ve run into them before. So we know how to uh—take care of them.”

“Hm.” Little John jabbed a carrot in their direction, “witches or not, it doesn’t matter to me—you saved my skin out there, and I’ll never forget that. You kids are good with us.”

Warmth bloomed in Kairi’s stomach at the acceptance, and she smiled at the ready acceptance, squeezing her knees. “Thank you, Little John.”

“It’s the least I can do. Now—” After throwing the last carrot, peeled and diced, into the cookpot, Little John stood up, stretching. “Keep an eye on this stew for me, wouldja?” He tossed the wooden spoon over to a wide-eyed Roxas, “I need to get outta this ridiculous outfit. Friar Tuck, help the kids out if they need it. Hey, everybody!”

He rose his voice enough for everyone in the clearing to hear him, “food’ll be on in a bit, and after that, we’re gonna get a little surprise together for ol’ Rob, once he shows up.”

Little John’s mouth stretched into a wide grin as the area around them echoed with exuberant cheers.

-0-

“Is he coming yet—”

“Sshh!!! We can’t ruin the surprise!”

Roxas shifted in their hiding place behind the bushes, disgruntled. “They might not even be coming,” he grumbled, “they could be gone for hours. How could Little John know—”

“What, are you getting sleepy?” Kairi interrupted, teasing. “it’s dark, so they have to be here soon. Be patient!”

Night had truly fallen, and after everyone had eaten, conversations were cut short by Little John ushering everyone to find a hiding spot somewhere around the small hideaway, positive that Robin
and Marian would soon appear. So here they were, hiding behind some bushes for the last thirty minutes, and even Kairi would admit that her legs were starting to get numb.

“I just –”

“Shh!! Shh-shh!! You hear that?” Kairi flapped her hand, ears twitching forward as she caught the sound of footsteps entering the clearing.

“Oh, Robin,” she heard Maid Marian sigh, “what a beautiful night. I wish it would never end.”

Her voice ached with fondness, was full of so much love that Kairi felt her face heating up for unintentionally intruding on their moment.

“Surprise!!” Friar Tuck hollered, and rustling filled the space as the people of Nottingham emerged from their hiding places. “Long live Robin Hood!”

“And long live Maid Marian!” Another voice called out.

Cheers and clapping filled the air, and Kairi and Roxas popped out of their hiding spot in time to see Robin and Marian break apart from their embrace, Robin grinning widely as he took in the people’s joy.

“And down with that scurvy Prince John!!” Lady Kluck declared, her words increasing the volume of cheers and yelling, and eventually Kairi heard music filling the air. She turned and saw the rooster from earlier had pulled out the mandolin on his back and began to play, a playful grin stretching his features.

“Yeah,” Little John said fervently, a matching grin on his face as he began to sing, making up a spoof about Prince John.

A stringed instrument and the high sound of a flute joined the fray, and people slowly migrated to the center of the clearing to dance, the ones remaining on the outskirts beginning to clap in time with the beat.

“Kairi, Kairi!!” Skippy ran up to her and grabbed both of her hands with a grin, “we’re gonna dance, let’s go! You too, Roxas – sis, grab him!”

“Hold on, I don’t – wait, wait!!!”

Roxas protested loudly as he was pushed towards the makeshift dance floor, and Kairi laughed to the sky as she let Skippy pull her onward, the two of them beginning to spin around with everyone else.

The joy of Nottingham’s people was so contagious; Kairi eventually got lost in the music and cheers and dancing, bouncing from Skippy to Otto to Robin Hood himself. She even got to spend a moment spinning around with Maid Marian, the two of them shrieking with laughter. Roxas eventually got swept up in it too, and by the time she spun into his arms the two of them were bellowing to the sky with everyone else.

“A pox on the Phony King of England!!”
There was so much happiness, in spite of everything; so much light, even though Prince John was trying to choke every last drop out of this world with his greed, until not even a flicker remained.

It was wonderful.

Lady Kluck whooped and hollered as Little John picked her up and swung her around, and Kairi and Roxas skipped back into the fray as Little John started to sing once again. She felt lighter than air, with the town’s happiness surrounding her, like she could dance and dance and sing for hours; the strength of these people were a marvel, their joy a balm.

Nothing would keep these people of Nottingham down, Kairi decided; no matter how hard Prince John tries to smother them, they’ll push back twice as hard. She believes that.

The music played on well into the night, and the dance and merriment carried on along with it.

Kairi hadn’t had so much fun in ages.

-o-

“I don’t think they really need us.”

Kairi’s head lolled to the side to look at Roxas, who was staring deep into the fire, thoughtful. It was well into the evening, now, and the space in the hideaway had cleared out, most of Nottingham’s townsfolk heading back to their homes, helping each other avoid the royal guard, or the Sheriff and the Nightmares that are always at his back.

Roxas and Kairi deigned to stay within the hideaway, since they didn’t entirely have anywhere to go. The only ones there aside from them were Robin, Little John, Marian, and Lady Kluck. Friar Tuck had only just left after speaking with Robin and Little John in low whispers, heading to a different path that led into the forest after waving goodbye.

“…No,” Kairi finally agreed, turning back to the fire and leaning against Roxas’ arm, “I don’t think they do, either. It’s not like the other worlds, where we just swooped in and saved the day, huh?”

He snorted softly, rolling his eyes, “no, I guess it isn’t. You fine with it?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? We just –” Sighing, her eyes fluttered closed, “I just want to help however we can. They can’t handle those Nightmares, so we just – need to protect them.”

“Easy enough. They aren’t like any other Nightmare we’ve faced before – there’s no…no giant Nightmare or anything just – just a whole lot of them.”

“We can handle it.” Kairi said bracingly, yawning into her hand, “it’ll be fine. Protect the townsfolk, take out the Nightmares, find Sora.” The last task brought a quiet sigh, and Kairi drooped against Roxas, staring into the flames.

“…You can feel him,” Kairi finally said, “right?”

“I can.” Roxas confirmed, “I don’t know where, but he’s close. Maybe in this Nottingham place.”
“Mm.” Kairi yawned again, and after rubbing her eyes, she looked around the small clearing; Little John was lying in a hammock, deeply asleep, and Robin was a distance away with Marian, heads close together as they talked.

“I really miss home,” Kairi admitted, eyes beginning to drift closed, “I knew this would be hard but…it feels like we’ve been gone for such a long time.”

“We’re almost done.” She felt Roxas grab her hand, squeeze her fingers, “I miss home, too. But we’re close, I can feel it. We’ll be home soon, and we’ll have Sora with us, too. Okay?”

“‘kay,” she agreed, voice slurring with sleep, “I –”

I had a lot of fun, she wanted to say, more fun than I’ve had in months. She wasn’t sure if she was able to say it – maybe she did, she didn’t know. All she knew was that between one breath and the next, she was asleep.

-0-

The tentative peace in Nottingham didn’t last forever.

After the night of the tournament, it took a few weeks for the song that the townsfolk made about Prince John to reach him, and when it did, he set forth a punishment that would smother Nottingham into nothing.

“It’s like a ghost town, now,” Kairi whispered, horrified, as she took in the emptied streets of Nottingham’s small town. “Little John wasn’t kidding when he said that everyone was getting arrested,” Roxas murmured, looking at all the emptied houses, the darkened windows, “come on – let’s keep going before we get caught.”

The clouds above them rumbled ominously as they slowly made their way through the streets, the heavy gray pallor of the sky promising more rain. Downpours of rain have been plaguing the town on and off, the weather reflecting the dour, hopeless mood that’s taken over the townspeople. Businesses have been shut down, homes locked shut as more and more people are taken away to the jails, townsfolk replaced by Nightmares, constantly prowling the streets.

It’s forced Roxas and Kairi to be stealthier, as they made their way towards the castle, and has given Kairi plenty of opportunities to practice the one Stop spell she knows, giving Roxas time to sneak up on them to take them out after she’s stopped them in their tracks.

For the past few days, the two of them had been volunteer escorts to Maid Marian and Lady Kluck, bringing them to and from the castle and taking care to remove any Nightmares that end up on their path. They were almost at the castle, and Kairi was so caught up in getting there without being noticed by one of the many Nightmares or the Sherriff that she didn’t see that Roxas had stopped following her until she was a decent distance away.

“Roxas -?” She turned back, confused, and was greeted with the sight of his back, tunic whipping around a corner as he moved in the opposite direction, heading towards the town square.

“Hey- Roxas!!” Kairi hissed, and after making sure that no Nightmares were heading her way on
their patrols, she quickly skittered after him. “We’re going to get caught!! What on earth-?!”

And then she feels it – that familiar, faint light.

Her eyes went wide, and Kairi quickly scrambled forward to catch up to Roxas, the two of them carelessly ran until they reached the center of the town, Roxas slapping his hands against a tree littered with wanted posters.

“My feelings, I –” He gasped, trying to catch his breath, “can you? I – he’s here, I know it, I –”

“I don’t see it,” Kairi wheezed, nursing a stitch in her side, “I can feel it, but – Roxas, where - ???”

“Hold on – hold on, I think –”

Lips pursed into a thin line, Roxas begins to pick at the wanted poster, digging his nails in and slowly, painstakingly pulled out the nails from the paper, freeing the bottom half of the poster from the wood. “Roxas, your hands –” Kairi began to protest, but he cut her off with a sharp shake of his head.

“It’s fine,” he said as the second nail clattered to the ground, “I just – I need to – oh.”

As he slowly lifted the lower half of the poster, a white piece of paper fluttered to the ground. It was bright, pristine white – a white that made Kairi think of white walls, white hallways, a white room she’s never been in.

Kairi blinked the borrowed memories out of her eyes, confused, as Roxas slowly picked up the paper, breath catching in his throat as he flipped it around.

It was a drawing – a boy in red and blue and a boy in a black coat, standing side by side, holding hands.

“Oh,” Kairi whispered, and she grabbed Roxas’ elbow, pressing her cheek to his shoulder to try and offer some form of comfort. Roxas was silent, and Kairi gave him a moment, taking care to keep an eye out and make sure they didn’t get caught. He finally snapped out of it with a shaky sigh when thunder rumbled gloomily overhead, the wind slowly beginning to pick up around them.

Okay,” he said hoarsely, “it’s okay. Let’s – let’s go.”

He slowly put the drawing away, tucking it into the pack at his hip, and looked up to see Kairi standing in front of him with an outstretched hand. “Alright?”

“Yeah.” Roxas gave her a small smile as he placed his hand in hers, “alright. We’re getting closer, now.”

More thunder rolled overhead, and Kairi squeezed his hand before pulling him back into the alleys, keeping an eye out as they made their way back to the castle.

Maid Marian was waiting for them by the time they made it to her wing in the castle, standing by the gated doorway into her grounds, Lady Kluck standing at her side.
“Well, it’s about time you two showed up!” Lady Kluck puffed up as they neared, affronted, “we’ve been waiting for quite a while!”

“I’m sorry!” Kairi clasped her hands, bowing in apology, “something came up, and we had to take a different route! Are you ready?”

“Yes, of course!” Marian smiled at the two of them, “lead the way -we’ll follow you.”

“Okay. Roxas, can you take up the rear?”

Their charges collected, Kairi quickly led them away from the looming spires of Prince John’s castle, making their way into Sherwood Forest to return to Robin and Little John’s hideaway.

Halfway through their trek, Kairi heard a twig snap, and she whipped her head around in the direction where she heard it but was faced with nothing but trees. She continued walking after a moment of staring, waiting for something to appear, and she had the paranoid inkling of feeling eyes on her back.

“…it’s just horrible,” she heard Maid Marian say, tuning in on the conversation, “Miss Rabbit, and all her babies, locked away – how could Prince John do this??”

“He’s a cruel, heartless man that wants to suck everyone dry to feed his greedy, pathetic nature and stamp us all out,” Lady Kluck said, grim, her beak snapping in irritation. “The man knows nothing about ruling and thinks that to have power and respect is to be cruel.”

_We’ve faced worse things_, Kairi thinks, her eyes roaming across the forest. She thinks of Ansem, taking Riku away and destroying her home. Of Xehanort, breaking her into a thousand pieces. _People using power for horrible things is nothing new_. They can always be stopped, once people have had enough.

Kairi felt her shoulders loosen a little as she saw the familiar path to the hideaway come into view, and she quickened her pace. “We’re almost there!!” she whispered, “not long now, come on!”

She didn’t completely relax until they entered the clearing, letting out a sigh of relief once Marian and Lady Kluck found places to sit. “Okay, Little John told Roxas and I that he and Robin would be scoping the area and try to bring anyone that hasn’t gotten arrested here. And then we’ll try and get a plan together to –”

“Well, well,” a voice drawled behind them, making Kairi freeze up in surprise, “so this is where you’ve been running off to.”

Kairi didn’t know when she summoned her Keyblade, but she gripped it tight as she turned to face the large wolf that entered the clearing, the gold star on his chest gleaming as he grinned at them, smug. Behind her, she could hear Roxas’ Keyblades appear as well, and she planted her feet, ready for a fight as four Nightmares appeared, camouflage melting away as their bulbous chameleon eyes rolled wildly.

“These guys come in handy,” the Sheriff of Nottingham chuckled, “knew something fishy was going on when I saw you two running through town. And look at that! You led me right to Robin
Hood’s hiding place.”

Remembering the snap of twigs she’d heard, Kairi cursed her negligence – if she’d just investigated a little more than a cursory glance, then maybe -

“You need to leave,” Roxas ground out, “before we make you.”

“Oh, well y’see, I can’t do that,” the Sheriff crooned, “see, I’ve got to bring the fair Maid Marian back home; your dear old uncle Prince John wouldn’t be happy to find out you’re here, shacking up with an outlaw.”

Marian was shaking her head before he even finished speaking. “I won’t,” she said, trembling but firm, “I won’t go back there – I can’t!! What he’s doing to this town, to these people, it’s not right!! He’s no king at all, and I – I will not go back!!”

The Sheriff nodded solemnly, “figured you’d say something like that. Trigger!”

From the trees came a sharp ‘click!’ a rush of hair, and Kairi felt her hair stand on end when she heard Roxas cry out in pain. She whipped around in time to see Roxas fall to his knee, hissing in pain and clutching at his shoulder, the end of a crossbow bolt sticking out from between his fingers.

“Next one’s aimed at this girl’s pretty little head,” he said casually as Kairi ran to Roxas’ side, hands hovering over his injury, “so? What’s it gonna be?”

Kairi heard another ‘click’ as a crossbow was readied, and she itched to fight back, Keyblade shaking in her grasp.

“They’re children,” Marian breathed, horrified, and Lady Kluck stepped forward, puffing up with anger. “You no good scoundrel,” Lady Kluck hissed, “you fire at these children again and I swear I’ll –”

“Nut-sy!”

Another rush of air as a crossbow bolt was released, and Lady Kluck cried out as the bolt grazed the top of her head, taking her blue cap with it.

“Klucky, don’t!” Marian cried, “stop – stop! I’ll come back!” She rushed to stand in front of Kairi and Roxas, arms outstretched – protecting them. “I swear, I’ll return to the castle, just leave them be,” she pleaded, looking over her shoulder at Lady Kluck. “Klucky, stay here – take care of them, please. I’ll be fine.”

Marian turned back to face the Sheriff, jaw set, “I will leave with you as long as you leave them alone. These are my terms.”

“Hmm, you sure are driving a hard bargain,” the Sheriff hummed, “but, see – you’re in no position to try and make terms.”

Grinning, the Sheriff turned back towards his group of Nightmares and jerked his head at Kairi and Roxas, “take ‘em.”
The last thing Kairi heard before the Nightmares descended on them were Marian’s loud cries of protest and the Sheriff’s voice.

“Hooo!” He hooted loudly, “I can’t wait to tell Prince John I bagged me a couple of witches.”

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Kairi slowly came to to the sound of heavy rain and the mournful strumming of a mandolin.

“…Sometimes ups…outnumber the downs…but not in Nottingham…”

Her eyelids fluttered as she tried to fully wake up, but her limbs felt heavy, her head aching as she attempted to move. Sounds were muffled as they reached her, making her feel like her ears were stuffed with cotton, and she groaned quietly.

“We’d up and fly if we had wings for flyin’…can’t you see the tears we’re cryin’…Can’t there be some happiness for me…”

I’m so tired, Kairi thought, sluggish. I just want to sleep…just for a little while.

If she just got a little more sleep, things will clear up; just a little rest, and she’ll figure out what to do after.

“…Not in Nottingham.”

Thunder rolled, and as Kairi drifted off, she heard the distant echo of church bells.

It sounded lonely.

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“The next time Kairi awoke, it was to hissed voices outside of…wherever she was. She was able to open her eyes this time, and everything came into sharp focus. Kairi was sore, beat to hell, and, according to the jingle of chains and the gaunt faces of the townsfolk of Nottingham staring at her, she was in the jail. Attempting to move her hands told her that they were bound behind her back, and she could feel the gag tied tightly over her mouth.

“ – so we’ve got orders from Prince John to set up the gallows –”

Kairi’s ears twitched at that, and with a grunt of effort, she rolled over onto her other side, attempting to face the door to hear the conversation outside, only to end up face to face with Roxas.

His eyes fluttered open at her movements, and though he was bound and gagged like she was, the glassy look in his eyes told her all she needed to know about the pain he was in. She could see the
crossbow bolt, still embedded in his shoulder, and hissed behind her gag.

“We’re to hang Friar Tuck at dawn,” the Sheriff said smugly, “and if Robin Hood takes the bait, we’ll soon have him hanging on the end of a noose, too.”

“And the witches?” She heard another voice ask, “what about them?”

“We’ll have them taken care of as soon as we take out Robin Hood,” the Sheriff assured, “make an example outta them, as well. So! The Friar’s locked up - let’s get to making those gallows.”

Their voices trailed off as they moved further down the hall, and Kairi watched Roxas’ eyes flutter closed in pain.

She has never felt so helpless; bound and gagged, unable to do anything but watch her friend lay in front of her, hurt. She didn’t know what to do – Kairi could undo knots, no problem, but she couldn’t break chains. Her hands were freed up enough to summon her Keyblade, but she couldn’t heal Roxas until that bolt was out of his shoulder; she was stuck, backed into a corner, and she burned with inadequacy.

Kairi doesn’t know how long she laid there, watching Roxas drift in and out of consciousness, wheezing through the pain of his injured shoulder. She heard a clock chime three times, and she sighed through her nose, wondering how she was going to be able to get out of the bind she was in.

The door to the large cell suddenly clicked and slowly swung open, and Kairi felt her stomach cramp up with anxiety. Two large shadows filled the doorway, and every muscle in Kairi’s body melted in relief when those shadows entered the room and became Friar Tuck and Little John.

Scooting forward, she let out muffled cries behind her gag, and Little John’s face dropped with shock when he saw the way Kairi and Roxas were tied up, crumpled on the floor. “Good Lord,” he gasped, crouching down at Kairi’s side, “what on earth did they do to you two?? Kluck told me what happened with Marian, I –”

She heard the jingle of keys, and Kairi could’ve cried as her chains fell away, freeing her hands to rip off her gag. Friar Tuck had quickly bent down to assist Roxas, removing his gag, and he groaned quietly with pain as his chains were removed.

“I’ve got him, I’ve got him,” Kairi whispered hoarsely, quickly crawling to Roxas’ side, “you guys go let everyone else.”

“But kid, he’s –”

“Little John.”

He fell silent at the tone of her voice, and she sat up as straight as she could, “I can do this,” she said, voice steady, “go free everyone else.”

Her face betrayed nothing as he looked into her eyes, and whatever he saw there let him nod at her, pushing himself up to his feet. “Come on, Friar – she’s got it.”

“But John –”
“She’s got it. Let’s get everyone loose.”

Kairi didn’t watch them leave, leaning over Roxas and gently placing a hand on his chest. “Hey,” she said softly, making sure to smile, “you with me? How are you feeling?”

“Aside from the crossbow bolt in my shoulder?” He asked, strained, “never better. You?”

“Like I took on a titan and lost.”

Roxas huffed out a laugh that quickly turned into a grimace of pain as the motion jostled his shoulder. “Okay, I…Roxas? I’ve gotta take the bolt out. Okay?”

“Yeah.” He grunted, “it’s fine. Just do it.”

“Alright.” Kairi slowly wrapped her hand around the bolt, “I’m gonna take it out on three, okay? Now….one –”

Before Roxas could tense up, she quickly pulled out the bolt, heart dropping at his strangled cry of pain and the blood that welled out of the wound. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” she babbled, letting the bolt clatter to the ground and quickly calling on her Keyblade, “you’re gonna be fine, I promise –”

Quickly lifting her Keyblade above her head, Kairi whispered a quiet “Heal,” and the cell glowed with healing green light. She could feel the awed eyes at her back, but Kairi only had focus for her friend, taking huge, relieved gulps of air as the pain receded.

“They are magic,” she heard Skippy whisper loudly, and she choked on a laugh while Roxas sat up, rotating his healed shoulder. “Good?”

“Awesome.” He confirmed, and the two of them slowly stood up, stretching out their stiff limbs.

Little John had apparently bounced back from the awe of Kairi healing Roxas’ wounds, because he strode up to them, urgent. “Alright, kids, here’s the plan,” he whispered, “Rob’s en route to Prince John’s quarters right now – he’s gonna clean him out, and then we’re leaving.”

“But – we can’t,” Kairi blurted out, eyes wide, “we – we can’t leave Maid Marian behind.”

“Can’t lea – you can’t go and get Marian on your own, you two –”

“Can handle it.” Roxas cut off shortly, “we’re a lot tougher than we look.”

“Roxas is staying with you, anyway.”

“I’m – what?!” He gaped at her, outraged. “Kairi, you – don’t go get Marian alone, you –”

“Can handle it.” Kairi interrupted, repeating him. “Roxas, they’re eventually going to notice and raise an alarm. And when they do, Nightmares are going to show up. We can’t leave the townsfolk to handle them on their own.”

She knew Roxas agreed with her, but his expression twisted up all the same, not wanting to leave her behind. Kairi grinned, reassuring, “I’ll see you in a bit,” she promised. “I’ll have Maid Marian
with me.”

“You better. Don’t do anything super dumb and get yourself hurt.”

“You’re one to talk!”

An arrow flew through the window just then, a length of rope attached to the end, and embedded itself in the wooden frame of the cell door. Little John quickly grabbed the arrow, nocking it onto a bow of his own and aiming out the window. “Alright, folks,” he said, letting the arrow fly, “it’s go time.”

Kairi’s heart had already started to race in her chest, and she shared one last look with Roxas before heading for the door, pushing it open and slipping out of the cell.

-o-

Running through the halls of the prison, Kairi suddenly realized she had no idea how to get to Maid Marian’s quarters.

It was the most obvious place for her to be, and though she knew how to get to them from the outside of the castle, she didn’t know a lot of the layout from within to get her there. She didn’t know any of the castle’s layout, honestly, since she was dragged here unconscious.

Kairi didn’t want to stay here, stuck, until she got caught and thrown back into the cells again, and she shifted in place, unsure of what to do. Looking down at her hands, the embroidery on her bodice caught Kairi’s eye, and she gasped sharply as she remembered.

Of course. Of course!!!

Placing her hand over the small dragon, Kairi closed her eyes, feeling the stitching against the pads of her fingers, and hoped. Please work, she pleaded, please come to me.

Warmth gathered beneath her fingers, and with a flash of light, her Dream Eater was there, curled around her shoulders. Her dragon chirped at her, waiting, and Kairi couldn’t stop the wide grin that spread across her face. “Oh, hi!!” She scratched her Dream Eater beneath its chin, and it rumbled happily, nuzzling into her cheek.

“I’ve missed you so much. Do you think you can help me find Maid Marian and get her out of here?”

Her Dream Eater chirped again, and after a lengthy stretch it was up in the air with a flap of its wings. Kairi jumped a little, ecstatic, “ohhh good!! I’ll follow you, let’s go!!”

Kairi followed her Dream Eater as it led her down the stairs to the gated door leading to the courtyard of the castle, and Kairi slowly cracked open the door enough for her and her dragon to slip through. Sitting by the door, the Sheriff of Nottingham was slumped in a chair, deeply asleep, snores rattling through the air, and Kairi could see a few Nightmares, scattered across the courtyard. High above them, she could see the rope, heavy bags of coin swaying in the breeze as they’re slowly pulled into the prison cell.
If I alert the Sheriff, everyone else will get caught. There’s gotta be something I can do to get him away from here. Kairi chewed on her lip, thinking, and after deciding, pushed the door open a little more, enough for her Dream Eater to slip through. “I need you to distract them,” she whispered. “Distract them all. Get the Nightmares and the Sherriff away from here, if you can.”

Quiet as a ghost, her dragon slipped through the gap she made and flew off into the night. It wasn’t more than a few seconds before Kairi heard her Dream Eater let out a ghastly screech, sending the Sheriff surging to his feet, awakening with a loud snort. “What in tarnation was that?!” he sputtered, sword in hand.

“You – go!” He snarled at the Nightmares, “go on then, go get it!! Get!!” Swinging his short sword, he directed the Nightmares to head towards the noise, and Kairi watched them scatter off into the shadows, the Sheriff at their tails.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she sighed, slipping out into the courtyard and carefully closing the door, “I’m so glad that worked.”

It took a minute or so for her Dream Eater to return, and when it did, Kairi welcomed it back with open arms. “You’re amazing,” she cooed, laughing quietly when it nuzzled her cheek, “alright – let’s go, before they come back!”

After taking to the air again, her dragon was off, and Kairi ran after it, the two of them heading to the west end of the castle. From the outside, Kairi knew that Maid Marian’s room was up in a tower on the west end of Prince John’s castle, near the gardens; once she got Marian, there was an exit and a little bridge that led right to the edges of Sherwood Forest, and they’d be safe.

All I have to do now is actually find the room, she thought to herself, huffing as she ran up stone steps, the end of her Dream Eater’s tail swishing around a corner.

She attempted to stay in the shadows and make her steps light, her skirts clenched in one fist and her Keyblade in the other, but scores of Nightmares prowled the halls, and she caught the attention of a few despite her best efforts. She couldn’t risk an alarm being raised, bringing more trouble her way, and with her Dream Eater’s help, she quickly took out any Nightmares in her path.

From a distance, she could hear the rising uproar at the center of the castle, near the courtyard, making her stomach clench with nerves; her time was running out. She needed to get Marian out, and fast.

I’ll take them all out, Kairi vowed grimly, thinking of the remaining obstacles that prowled the castle. I have to. I must.

-0-

Her Dream Eater led her to a familiar tower at the far west reaches of the castle, and sure enough, Kairi could see the familiar trails of flowers creeping up the stones. Kairi’s shoulders relaxed a little at the sight – she finally made it.
The only thing that stood between her and the door were the Nightmares that guarded the bridge.

She counted about ten, at least - tall, armored, imposing, skittering back and forth across the stones. Their large, bulbous eyes rolled in their sockets and they vocalized back and forth at each other with croaky, chittering voices.

Squeezing her Keyblade, Kairi looked down at her dragon, perched on her shoulder. “You start at one end, I’ll start at the other.” She whispered, looking into its large eyes to make sure it was listening, “we’ll meet in the middle. Okay?”

It blinked, solemn, before taking off to the skies, looping and twirling in the air before diving upon the Nightmares guarding Marian’s door with a scream and a blast of dragon breath.

“Alright, then,” Kairi said, and darted forward with her Keyblade raised high, ready to get to work.

She caught one Nightmare by surprise, running up on it while its back was turned and with a fierce combination of hits, it crumpled to the ground and vanished with wisps of darkness. Her surprise attack alerted two of the others, and they rushed at her, one of them using its long, elastic tongue as a whip while the other threw itself at her, ready to tear at her with its claws.

Skipping back a step, Kairi quickly cast a Blizzard spell, freezing one Nightmare in place, and then swung her Keyblade down in time to slice the other Nightmare’s tongue in half, watching it flop on the stone and wriggle in place before crumbling away. It shrieked in pain, throwing itself backwards to retreat, but Kairi wouldn’t give it the chance, quickly getting into its space and striking at it before calling down Thunder, lightning cracking around her in arcs until it and the other Nightmare encased in ice slumped to the ground and faded into dust.

There were two more remaining on her end, and Kairi didn’t waste any time, coming in low and slashing at the two Nightmares until they vanished, just in time for her Dream Eater to let out a stream of Fire and land on her shoulder, the burning Nightmare screeching in pain until its voice croaked away and it tumbled over the side of the bridge, crumbling into ash before it ever hit the ground.

“We make such a good team,” Kairi panted as her Dream Eater found its usual perch around her shoulders. “Good job.”

She trotted the rest of the way across the bridge to Marian’s door, and when she tried the handle to get into the room, she found that the door was locked and sucked on her teeth, irritated.

“The Sheriff probably had the key,” she muttered darkly, “which means Little John probably has it. How can I -?”

“Kairi?? Kairi – is that you??”

Maid Marian’s voice reached her through the door, muffled, and she sounded scared. “Yes – it’s me!! I’m – Robin Hood and Little John set up a prison break and I – I came to get you out of here!”

“But those monsters –”

“I got rid of them, I swear. I’m gonna get you out but the door is locked, I just need a–”
Kairi stopped short, suddenly very aware of the giant key she was holding in her hand. “…a key. Oh. Oh, I’m a moron.”

Holding Destiny’s Embrace in both hands, she leveled the end of her Keyblade at the keyhole in the door and focused, concentrating with a furrowed brow. A thin beam of light raced towards the keyhole, and after a moment Kairi heard the very soft ‘click’ of the door unlocking.

“Awesome,” she whispered, delighted, skipping forward and opening the door, quickly getting swept up into a hug by a very shaken Maid Marian. Her lavender veil was missing, showing the headpiece beneath that covered her ears, and her eyes were rimmed red and wide.

“Oh, Kairi, I’m so sorry,” she apologized, “I shouldn’t have – if I just went with the Sherriff, neither of you would’ve gotten hurt – and what is that around your neck -?!”

“Don’t apologize!” Kairi cut her off, squeezing her in return, “it’s okay. I think that would’ve happened no matter what we did. So don’t worry! Especially not now – we’ve gotta get out of here.”

Grabbing Marian by the hand, Kairi started to lead her out towards the bridge, but stopped short at the scent of smoke that reached her. Back the way she came, towards the courtyard, an ominous orange glow on the horizon that was growing, flickering.

A fire.

“Marian,” Kairi asked, eyes still locked on the fire, “you know the way down to the gardens, right? To that door?”

“Yes, but –” tugging her hand, Marian led her to the window in her room and pointed down at the gardens below, and Kairi gaped at the Nightmares that patrolled the area.

“They knew I would try and leave this way,” she despaired, “they put these monsters everywhere.”

“Okay,” Kairi whispered, clutching her Keyblade, “okay.”

She took in a deep breath, fortifying herself before exhaling in a slow stream, and turned to Marian, “you know the way to the gardens?” she asked again.

Marian looked stricken, “Kairi,” she hissed, urgent, “Kairi, you can’t – there’s so many –”

“Trust me,” she urged. “You know the way. Head that way, hide, and wait for me there. I’ll call you when they’re gone.”

Hitching up her gown, Kairi hopped onto the stone lip of the window, sitting on the ledge, and counted out the Nightmares that waited down below. Twenty, at the very least, though who knows if more waited beyond the gate.

It didn’t matter – she’ll take care of it.

“Kairi, you don’t have to. We can -there’s got to be a different way –”

“Mm-mm. The castle’s on fire, somehow. We need to leave before it spreads, and this is our best way out. Don’t worry!”
Kairi turned back to look at Maid Marian, and she was glowing almost as brightly as her smile. “I was made to do this.” She said confidently, “trust me. Okay?”

With that, she pushed off the stone and leapt into the air, Marian’s cry of surprise echoing behind her.

She never hit the ground.

Hovering, she held her Keyblade aloft, glowing brighter and brighter as she prepared her Faith spell. A ring of light appeared on the ground beneath her, catching the eye of the Nightmares below, and they rushed towards her, jerky, hissing, a few of them attempting to jump up and reach her.

They would never touch her – she wouldn’t allow it.

“Light.”

She burst, a supernova, and blinding light scored the ground, the entire space covered in rippling, scorching rays.

By the time her spell faded, and she was slowly floating to the ground, only a handful of Nightmares remained. Doable, she thought, and she raced ahead, sending her Dream Eater off to take out some of the stragglers.

Kairi was tired; she was still sore from the chains, and could smell the increasing smoke, see the orange glow increase in the sky, melding with the coming dawn. But the Nightmares were gone, and Marian was free.

“Let’s go,” she said as soon as Marian ran into the garden, eyes wide. After grabbing her hand, the two of them ran to the barred door that was their last obstacle of escape, and Kairi pointed her Keyblade at it, unlocking it with a flourish. Their feet pounded against the stones as they ran across the bridge, and Marian’s hand slipped away as Kairi skid to a stop, head jerking towards the water below.

She could feel something.

“Kairi?”

“I…” She licked her lips, “I’ve got to get something. Okay? It’s fine. Go into Sherwood Forest – the rest of the townsfolk were probably heading that way. Go until you meet them there, okay?”

“I don’t want to leave you -!”

“Go.” She stressed, and she didn’t move until Marian had vanished into the trees, throwing looks over her shoulder at her the entire time. Once she’d vanished, Kairi turned to the side of the little bridge and hopped into the water, eyes roaming over the moat that surrounded the castle.

“Where,” she whispered, searching, “where are you?”

A few minutes of thorough searching, wading through the water and the weeds, and she found it, right near the bank of the moat. It looked like a toy, something one of the children had dropped, but
she recognized it, recognized every plank of wood and the billowing sail.

*How far could a raft take us?*

She huffed a quiet laugh and let herself have a moment before scooping the little raft up in one hand, just like the one they were building when they were kids.

It was so warm in her hands.

“Found you,” she whispered, climbing out of the water onto the bank with her free hand, and wrung out the soaked skirts of her gown after tucking the fragment away in her pack. Buoyant with success, Kairi turned to follow Marian’s path into the forest, but stopped when he heard a distant voice.

“*Kairi!!! Kairi!!!***

It was Roxas, and he sounded frantic, so panicked that Kairi called her Keyblade back into her hand and ran towards his voice, concerned. “Roxas!!” She yelled, “Where are you?! Are you okay?!”

She kept running, heart pounding steadily against her ribs, closer to the source of the fire slowly spreading across the grounds, until Roxas burst from the bushes, eyes wide, his Dream Eater at his side. Little John trailed behind him, Robin Hood and Skippy at his tail, and Kairi thought she was about to pass out with how relieved she was, her Keyblade vanishing in a spark of light just as Roxas slammed into her with a hug.

“Thank god, I thought you didn’t make it!!” he yelled, squeezing her, “I tried to wait, I – but the fire, it was spreading so fast, I just –”

“I’m okay!!” Kairi promised, “I was sending Maid Marian away – I got her out, but there were so many Nightmares around her door –”

“Maid Marian??” Robin gasped, eyes wide, “she – she was – she was here?!! Is she okay, did they -?!”

Kairi held up a hand, reassuring, “she’s fine,” she promised. “I sent her off into Sherwood Forest to find the rest of the townsfolk. It’s all fine.” She turned back to Roxas, grinning brightly, “I found him,” she whispered. “Everything is fine.”

She felt Roxas droop a little with relief.

-0-

After the people of Nottingham freed themselves from Prince John’s grip, the sun started to come out again.

Kairi closed her eyes, soaking in the warm rays as the church bells echoed jovially across the air, counterpoint to the townsfolk’s ecstatic cheering.
“I’ve never been to a wedding before,” Roxas mused, watching Robin Hood and Maid Marian wave outside of a departing carriage, newly married. “That was really nice.”

“It was.” Kairi agreed, smiling, “and King Richard was plenty nice, too; I can see why the townsfolk love him so much.”

“Yeah.” They sat at the steps of Friar Tuck’s church, now cleared of people, and stared up at the impossibly blue sky. “We weren’t really needed to help with all the Prince John stuff,” Kairi finally said, “but…I’m glad we were able to protect them, at least.”

“Definitely.” Roxas’ smile was small, “always good to be a small part of something bigger. Oh –”

Hopping up to his feet, he pointed up at the church’s bell tower, “looks like it’s time.”

Kairi rose to her feet, and looked up at the Sleeping Keyhole, hovering between the rows of bells.

“On to the next,” she sighed, calling Destiny’s Embrace to her hands. “You’re not gonna ditch me for a different world again, are you?”

“Well,” Roxas said as Oathkeeper appeared, “I’ll definitely try not to.”

Kairi rolled her eyes, scoffing, and reached out with her free hand to grip Roxas’ hand tightly. “So now we really won’t get separated.”

“Because that worked so well in Atlantis.”

“Hush! Are you ready?”

As one, they raised their Keyblades to the Keyhole, and watched as two beams of light raced to it, the Keyhole unlocking with an echoing ‘click’. Immediately, Kairi felt drowsy, and as Nottingham faded to black around her, she made sure that her grip on Roxas’ hand stayed strong.

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**Keychain Received: Oo-de-lally!**

**Keychain Received: Fortunes Forecast**

Chapter End Notes

**OO-DE-LALLY. I’M BEAT.**

for roxas in this world I'd mentioned he was a lynx lookin' kinda cat, but for kairi I wasn't sure what to pick until my friend bren told me about the black footed cat's existence. it's small but very deadly and I was like 'OK......PERFECT' and for the nightmares here, I took a little inspo from botw's lizalfos 'cause I was playing it in between writing this.
so. four worlds down!!! one!! to!!! go!!!

we're in the home stretch now guys!!! I'm so excited, I've been waiting to get to this part for WEEKS.

school's about to start for me this month so I've REALLY hit crunch time for this fic lmao. thank goodness I've only got two chapters left - I'm pretty sure I can get them out in time! fingers crossed for me guys, send me good energy to finish strong!!

once again -comments and kudos are so loved. thank you everyone!!! I'm going to have a glass of wine and de-stress. see y'all in chapter 9!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK, AND IT DIDN'T TAKE ME THREE WEEKS THIS TIME
BAYBEEEEE

last word. last world!! LAST WORLD!!! oh, I'm so excited, are y'all excited.

all of these worlds were such a good, fun, challenge - I hope everyone liked them! and
I hope everyone tries to watch the movies, if they haven't already. they were so dear to
me when I was a kid, especially these last two worlds.

anyway - what are we waiting for? let's dive in guys!

unbeta'd as usual, all edits done by me!

let's bring him home, everyone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world felt a little bigger this time, somehow, Kairi noted groggily as she slowly woke up.

Blinking slowly, she wrinkled her nose and yawned widely, taking in the purple-blue shades of the
night sky. She heard the quiet push and pull of water, and the lively chatter of bugs and other night
life and wondered where she ended up this time. Her Dream Eater wasn’t at her side again, and she
tried not to worry about it, focusing more on where she ended up this time.

“Oh, this feeling is familiar.” Kairi heard Roxas say at her side, and her heart jumped at the sound
of his voice, thrilled with the realization that his hand was still wrapped up in hers.

“I knew holding hands would work!” She crowed, triumphant as she sat up, pulling Roxas up with
her. “Didn’t I tell y – oh.” Kairi stopped short as she took in Roxas’ changed appearance, from the
tips of his rounded mouse ears to his shiny golden fur. “Oh.”

“Now you notice,” he says as she looks down at herself, taking in her tiny paws and reddish-brown
fur. “You gonna freak out again?”

“…Hm. Well.” She held her hands out in front of her, wiggled her fingers. “…At least my clothes
are back to normal this time. And that explains why everything feels so…big.”

Now that she knew the reason for the feeling she had upon waking, Kairi was able to take in the
trees, towering high, high above them, the water that stretched on for miles, and the foliage
surrounding them making her feel like they were in a forest.

“How are we supposed to do this when we’re so small??” Kairi wondered, utterly intimidated by
the challenge before them; this swamp could go on forever, how could they find Sora and help
anyone like this?
“You’re worrying too loudly,” Roxas chided, hopping onto his feet and offering a hand to pull her up. “It’s gonna be fine. I’ve done this before, and it’s not all bad, you’ll see. We can do it.”

“If you say so,” she mumbled, rocking back on her heels once she was pulled onto her feet. “Wanna try and figure out where we need to go?”

“Yeah, let’s see where we end up.”

With that, the two were off, slowly picking their way through mud and foliage to make their way further into the swamp. As they walked, Kairi could already feel trouble in the air; compared to the first swamp she landed in, this place felt so much *darker*. It showed in the trees – tall, dark, skeletal, the shapes of the branches akin to hands that could snatch them up any minute – in the water, dark and murky, clouded.

It especially showed in the burn between her shoulder blades – the itch beneath her skin that told her they were being watched.

“Hey, Roxas,” Kairi finally spoke, grabbing his offered hand as he guided them over a large tree root, “have you been feeling like –”

“– like we’re being watched?” He finished, looking grim, “yeah. I have. It’s like…” His eyes scanned the area, lingering on the places covered in shadow that he couldn’t see, “it feels like it’s waiting for the right moment. Stalking us.”

A chill raced down Kairi’s spine at the thought, and she eyed the many shadowed spaces surrounding them with wariness.

Rapid splashing began to echo across the air, and Kairi’s hand snapped out, gripping tightly at the back of Roxas’ shirt and pulling him to a stop. “Wait, wait,” she hissed, “what is that, do you hear that?!”

“Yeah, wh – wait, wait wait wait, come on –”

Grabbing her hand, Roxas began to pull Kairi towards the source of the noise, and among the splashing Kairi could hear breathing, high pitched and terrified, and alarm was quickly replaced by concern. Together, they pushed through the tall weeds in time to see a little girl, dress soaking wet, climb over the large roots of one of the trees and disappear beneath it.

“What on earth is a little girl doing in a place like this??” Kairi whispered, aghast, Roxas continuing to lead towards the tree they saw the girl vanish under. “I don’t know,” he said, grim, “but I bet it’s for nothing good. Come on, let’s go find out.”

It took a little work, the two of them hopping across bits of root sticking out of the water like stones across a river, but once they made it to the roots they were climbing until they found a good level place to stand, edging into the dark shadows beneath the trees. Kairi could hear the girl from the shadows, trying to quiet her shallow, scared breathing, and she ached with sympathy; they *had* to be able to help her somehow.

“Hello?” Kairi called, “are you alright?”
The girl said nothing, and there was a slight movement in the water as she pushed herself further into the corners of her hiding spot.

“We aren’t here to hurt you, I promise,” Roxas reassured, “we just – thought you needed help.”

“….you promise?” The girl reluctantly said, “you’re not just here ‘cause Mister Snoops sent you?”

“We swear.”

That appeared to be enough for her, and the girl slowly waded out of the shadows, clutching a teddy bear close to her chest. She was so young – five or six at the most, with dirty blonde hair pulled back into pigtails and large brown eyes, which became even bigger once she saw them.

“Hi,” she said shyly, “where did you come from?”

“We should be asking you that,” Kairi said, smiling. “What’s your name? What are you doing out here in this swamp?”

“Oh, I’m Penny!” She then held out her bear to them, “and this is Teddy. We’re trying to get away from Mister Snoops. What’s your names?”

“I’m Kairi, and this is my friend Roxas. Why are you trying to get away from Mister Snoops?”

Penny’s face had tightened up at the mention of Mister Snoops, but before she could explain why, heavy splashing noises started up as something heavy moved through the water towards Penny’s hiding place. Guttural hissing filled the air, and Penny went pale, starting to scoot back into the shadows.

“They found me,” she whispered, “oh no – quick –”

Kairi yelped a little as Penny quickly scooped them up, slamming into Roxas’ shoulder with a grunt as they’re abruptly shoved into one of the pockets in Penny’s skirt, but not before seeing the large snout of a crocodile shove into the gap between the roots.

Penny shrieked, and Kairi clutched at Roxas as they were roughly jostled around in Penny’s pocket. “Brutus!!” she cried out, “let me go!! Let me go!! Hey – Nero, don’t you grab Teddy like that!!”

Kairi panicked a little at the fabric surrounding them getting damp with swamp water, and she could hear the frantic pounding of Roxas’ heart against her ear. “If she goes in the water, we’re in trouble,” he whispered, and his arms tightened around her back.

“Can a Reflect spell keep water out?” Kairi whispered back, and Roxas snorted quietly. They fell silent, listening to the swish of water around them, and after some time the sound of water morphed into the rough scrape of claws on wood. They apparently made it to their destination, and Penny started to move again, squirming and kicking.

“You brought me back, now put me down!! Brutus, you mean lizard -!”

Kairi felt her stomach lift into her throat as Penny was suddenly dropped, and felt it slam back into place when the three of them landed harshly on the wood. The tapping of footsteps rapidly approached them, a man’s whiny, nasally voice hitting Kairi’s ears once the steps were close enough.
“You found her?” he said, “oh, good – good boys, really good –”

A loud snarl from one of the crocodiles ripped through the air, and the voice quailed into silence, terrified.

“W-well –” his voice cracked, and he cleared his throat, annoyed, “well, Penny, I hope you learned a lesson after trying to run away, now. You – well, you’re lucky I even went and brought you back. If you try and run away again, I’ll let that – that thing in the woods get at you, you hear me?”

Penny said nothing, stubbornly silent, and the voice sighed heavily, “go to your room. I - I’m not feeding you.”

As Penny stood up and stomped towards the stairs, Kairi took a risk and peeked out of her pocket, taking in a short, mousy man, balding and wearing a faded yellow suit. He took off his glasses, rubbing a hand down his face, and he was muttering under his breath. She was able to catch the word ‘Medusa’ before Penny was up the stairs, and the man was out of sight.

-o-

“What was that about?” Roxas asked as Penny placed the two of them on her bed.

“That was Mister Snoops,” Penny said as she climbed up on the bed, kicking off her shoes and taking a seat near them, clutching her bear to her chest. “He’s one of the people keeping me here.”

“He sounds awful,” Kairi scowled, “how could he just – not feed you, or threaten you like that!!!” She planted her hands on her hips and started to pace across the scratchy blankets on the bed, agitated, “if I were taller, I swear I would – heck, I still might just -!”

“We never got to hear your answer, before those crocodiles showed up,” Roxas broke in, stopping Kairi’s rant before she was able to really get started. “why are you out here in this swamp, anyway?”

“They want me to get the diamond.” Penny answered simply, curling up against her lumpy pillows.

“The diamond?”

“Yes! There’s this pirate cave, with lots of gold, and treasure, and stuff. They – they want this one diamond called the Devil’s Eye. It’s huuuge, and shiny, and they talk about it all the time. They took me away to make me go find it, since I can fit.”

Kairi didn’t like the sound of all this at all. “Fit where, Penny?”

“In the black hole.” She frowned and clutched Teddy to her chest, “It’s where all the pirate treasure is. Teddy doesn’t like going down there – it fills up with water, and it’s so dark. But if I find the diamond, I can go back.”

“Back?”
“Back to the orphanage.” Penny explained further, “so I can get adopted.”

Kairi shared a grim look with Roxas, but Penny didn’t notice, fiddling with Teddy’s arms as she spoke. “I don’t want to find that stupid diamond,” she continued, frowning deeply, “I don’t care about it! I don’t even want to be here, but Medusa made me! She’ll never let me go until I find it!

I’m tired of going in that black hole; they made me go down there today and I still can’t find it! I’ve been trying to run away, but Snoops catches me! I don’t even care about the monster in the woods anymore, I – I wanna go back!”

The mention of the ‘monster’ in the woods caught their attention, and Kairi moved over to Penny, placing a hand on her foot. “Penny,” she said softly, “did you say there was a monster in the woods?”

“Yeah.” Penny sniffled quietly, “it’s always been there. Ever since Medusa made me come here.”

Kairi looked back at Roxas, eyes wide, and he moved to stand next to her. “Have you seen it at all?” he pressed, “do you know what it looks like?”

She shook her head, “nuh-uh. It’s always in the dark, so you can’t see it. But you can feel it. It feels big and mean. Sometimes, you can see the eyes – they’re red, and bright, and so scary.” Penny shivered, “I don’t ever wanna have to see the monster.”

She glanced off to the side, towards the rickety looking clock on her threadbare nightstand, and scooted off the bed, placing Teddy onto the pillows. “It’s bedtime.” She said simply, “I’ve gotta get ready.”

As Penny changed for bed, Roxas and Kairi turned their backs to her, leaning in close to each other to speak in soft whispers. “What do we do?” Kairi asked, nervously biting her thumb, “should we – should we go find the Nightmare?”

“Honestly, I think it’ll find us.” Roxas murmured, “I don’t – I don’t feel good about it, right now. We’d be leaving Penny alone.”

“I don’t like it either. Roxas, we’ve got to get her out of here, but I – I don’t know how. I don’t know what we can do.”

“Alright, Teddy!” They turned back to face Penny, now in a large nightgown, as she knelt at the side of her bed and took Teddy’s paws, folding them together. “It’s time to say goodnight prayers.”

Folding her own hands in front of her nose, Penny squeezed her eyes shut and spoke softly, “thank you for my two new friends, Kairi and Roxas. Please help me find the diamond faster, so I can leave forever, and maybe get adopted. Please keep the monster in the woods away and let someone find my rescue message soon. Amen.”

Roxas smiled lightly at the way Penny pronounced their names – ‘carry’ and ‘ruckus’, and Kairi’s ears twitched at the mention of a message.

“Rescue message?” Kairi inquired as Penny flipped her covers back, burrowing herself in her bed.

“Yeah! I’ve been sending messages in bottles, whenever I can. If someone finds it, then maybe – maybe someone will rescue me, and bring the police and everything. Snoops hasn’t caught me, so I’ll keep sending them until someone answers.”
Yawning, Penny pulled her covers up to her chin, eyes already drooping closed. “Goodnight, Kairi. Goodnight, Roxas. I’m happy I met you.”

“…Goodnight, Penny.” Roxas finally said as she drifted off. “We’re – we’re glad we met you, too.”

They watched her for a little while, her twitching eyelids and deep breaths as she slept, and Kairi sighed, resigned. “We can’t leave her.” She decided. “I can’t bear the thought of her dealing with this alone.”

“No,” Roxas agreed, “I can’t, either. Plus, there’s that Nightmare, out there. We – we can keep her safe. As safe as we can, until someone comes for her and gets her out of here.”

“And once Penny’s gone and safe, we can take care of that Nightmare for good.” Kairi said firmly, sitting on the bed and leaning on one of Penny’s lumpy pillows. Roxas sat next to her with a long, tired sigh, folding his hands over his stomach and looking up at Penny’s ceiling.

“…Can you feel him?” Roxas quietly asked, eyes firmly planted skyward.

Kairi hummed, eyes sliding closed. “…Yes.” She finally said, “he’s close. But I can’t….really pin it down yet.”

“Me, neither.”

They said nothing for a while, Kairi looking over at Penny as she slept. “It’s fine.” She said firmly, reassuring him and herself. “We can do this. We’ll keep Penny safe, and we’ll find him. Okay?”

When she received nothing in response, Kairi turned to look at Roxas, concerned, only to find him fast asleep, mouth open slightly as his head tilted to the side.

Kairi sputtered out a quiet laugh, turning her face into the pillow to muffle it, making sure she doesn’t wake anyone up. It’s understandable, being so tired, Kairi thought to herself, turning onto her other side to look past Roxas to the stars outside. We’ve been working hard, haven’t we?

Out in the swamp, she could feel Sora faintly call to them, a flickering she couldn’t entirely trace. We’re on our way, she silently vowed, eyes sliding closed. Hang on just a little while longer, alright?

Between one breath and the next, she was asleep.

-0-

Kairi and Roxas didn’t get to meet this Medusa person for another week.

During that week, they became well acquainted with Mister Snoops, the sniveling man that wakes Penny up every day, at the crack of dawn, to drag her to the cove to search for the diamond. They got very good at hiding from Brutus and Nero, Medusa’s pet crocodiles, whenever they did a patrol around the boat, taking care to stake out Penny’s room in case she tried to attempt to escape again.
Kairi and Roxas also got to see the ‘black hole’ Penny talked about, leading to the hidden pirate cove below.

Every morning, without fail, they rose with Penny at dawn, hiding away in the pocket of her skirt just as Snoops came to drag her off the riverboat. Keeping a tight hold on her wrist, Snoops pulled Penny through the swamp until they reached a small, sparse beach, heading up a large outcropping of rocks jutting out of the low tide.

From Penny’s pocket, Kairi could see a gray, broken tree, a long rope and a bucket attached to the one branch. After a few halfhearted threats from Mister Snoops, Penny was pushed into the bucket and slowly lowered down into the dark.

Once they were out of sight, Kairi and Roxas poked their heads out of their hiding spot and took in the wet earth and the jewels littered across it, glittering in the dim light of the lamp Penny held in one hand. Further into the cave, an ominous gurgling filled the air, reminding them that they were on borrowed time until the tide came back in, flooding the cove once more.

Every time, Penny would half-heartedly search the cave, kicking at rocks and scooping gems into the bucket, her Teddy clutched tightly in the crook of her arm. As soon as the gurgling in the shadowed end of the cave became a roar, Penny clambered into the bucket, calling for Snoops to pull her up, that she might’ve found it, and they were yanked back up as the tide came back in.

Apparently, a week full of disappointments was the last straw for Mister Snoops, because that evening, he sent Penny to bed, mumbling about making some calls, and the next day, Medusa was there.

“Pennyyyy!” A shrill voice called up the stairs, “where are you? Pennyyyyy!”

Kairi had never seen Penny pale so fast, not even when she was being forced down into the pirate cove, and she had to wonder how horrible this woman was to make Penny so frightened.

“I don’t want to,” she whimpered, “I don’t want to go see Medusa.”

“It’s okay,” Roxas placed a hand on her tightly clenched fist, reassuring, “we’ll go with you. You won’t have to deal with her alone.”

Medusa was a tall, pale woman, wearing an ill-fitting red dress and garish makeup, short fiery red hair mussed from the hat and coat she shoved into Mister Snoops’ arms.

“Oh, Penny,” she cooed once the girl slowly made her way down the stairs, throwing her arms open, “look at you. Come here, come here!” Medusa batted her large false eyelashes, her thin lips stretching into a wide smile, and even from her place in Penny’s pocket, Kairi could see the lipstick stains on her teeth.

Penny slowly shuffled towards her, clutching Teddy close to her chest, and as soon as she was within arm’s reach Medusa snapped her hand out, latching onto Penny’s hand and pulling her in close.

“Penny,” Medusa said sweetly, paying no mind to how the girl was trying to pull her hand out of her tight grip, “what’s this I’ve been hearing about you sending messages, hm?”
Penny froze, going completely still under Medusa’s hand. “I –”

“And you haven’t found the Devil’s Eye yet? It’s been three months, Penny – do you think we want to be out in this swamp forever?”

“I’m trying,” Penny insisted, her voice small, “it’s just, it’s the water, and Teddy doesn’t like –”

“Well,” Medusa said loudly, cutting her off, “we’ll just have to try harder, won’t we? So Teddy doesn’t get too wet.” She squeezed Penny’s hand, tight, her grip making her wince and try to futilely pull her hand away. “Tomorrow, we’ll find the diamond – you’ll see! Now –”

She let go of Penny’s hand, and she pulled the sore digits to her chest. “-off to bed with you! I don’t want to hear anything else about ‘secret messages’, do you understand?”

“But it’s still early!” Penny protested, scowling. Medusa’s pale green eyes rolled down towards her, and Penny stiffened right back up. “Do you think you get to make any demands here, little girl?” she asked quietly, “now – go to bed.”

Penny quickly turned and headed up the stairs, and Kairi slowly let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding.

“That was awful.” Roxas said under his breath. “Penny, are you okay? Did she hurt your hand?”

“My. It’s a little sore.” Penny leaned against her door until it closed and then sat on the floor, curling her knees up to her chest. Climbing out of her pocket, Kairi and Roxas scampered up until they reached her knees, the two of them sitting on her kneecaps.

“She’s going to make me go down there again,” she whispered, “down in that black hole. And I’ve been trying and trying, but I can’t find it. I can’t find that diamond! I just, I just want –”

Her face screwed up as she tried not to cry, and she shoved her face into her bear to hide.

Kairi shared a quick panicked look with Roxas, wringing her hands in the face of Penny’s distress. More than anything, she wished that she were her regular size, her regular form; Kairi didn’t feel like she could protect this girl at all, not at the size she currently was.

How is she supposed to be able to keep Penny safe from these people who mistreat her when she’s only a few inches tall? What can two little mice do?

“Hey, Penny.”

She looked up slightly at Roxas’ voice, tears clinging to her lashes. “Yes?” she said, her voice tiny.

“Did you know that I was once stuck with some pretty bad people too?”

“Really?”

“Really. I had to do some things that I didn’t feel great about. But I got away from them, and now I’ve got lots of friends. And – and a family, too.”

Penny’s eyes sparkled with hope at that, and Roxas smiled, “so it’ll be alright. Someone will come and get you out of here, and we’ll stay with you until that happens. Okay?”
Penny sniffled a little, wiping at one of her eyes with the heel of her palm. “…okay.” She finally said, “thank you, Roxas.”

She still looked a little down, a little quiet, and didn’t bother to leave her room for the rest of the day, ignoring any calls of her name, curling up on her bed and reading one of the few books she was given.

It wasn’t until night had fallen that Penny started to move, jostling Kairi awake from a nap as she slid off the bed. “Penny?” Kairi whispered, “what are you doing?”

“I won’t do it,” she said as she pulled on her shoes, “I don’t wanna go into that black hole again, Kairi.”

She looked terrified as she scooped Kairi and Roxas up into her hands, “even if I – I don’t care if I run into the monster in the woods, I’ll – I’ll hide from it, too! I just wanna go away!”

With that, Penny tucked the two of them in her skirt pocket, and slowly opened her door and slipped out.

Peeking over the banister to make sure Snoops or Medusa weren’t around and Brutus and Nero weren’t on patrol, Penny quickly made her way down the stairs once she saw the area was clear, taking care to avoid the places where the wood croaked and squeaked. Once she was at the bottom of the stairs, Penny threw furtive glances over her shoulder as she sneaked out of the main doors, left wide open, and then ran down the ramp into the swamp.

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They got a fifteen-minute head start before Medusa noticed Penny’s absence, and five more minutes of running before the fireworks started.

Kairi and Roxas poked their heads out of Penny’s pocket, staring up at the fireworks blooming across the sky. “What’s with all the fireworks?” Roxas asked as Penny heaved herself over a rather large tree root. Penny said nothing, but her pace picked up, shoving foliage aside as she ran further into the swamp, trying not to trip over her feet as she splashed through a large puddle.

Kairi, meanwhile, was staring out into the woods, her hair standing up at the prickling sensation of being watched. Her hands tingled with the urge to summon her Keyblade, but she resisted, curling her fingers into tight fists

“It’s out there,” she ground out, “I can feel it. Penny, please be careful, okay?”

A sudden, loud rumble filled the air over the loud popping of fireworks, and Penny gasped quietly, ducking down behind a rock and thick swamp weeds just as Medusa passed by, riding a large swamp-mobile. A bright beam of light cut into the bushes, and Kairi could feel Penny curl in further on herself, taking in shallow breaths through her teeth.

She didn’t relax until the light was gone, until the rumbling machine turned away, the sound growing faint as Medusa carried on her search, and once she was gone Penny was running, wading further into the swamp.
Right in the direction where Kairi felt the eyes on their backs.

“Oh no,” Kairi murmured, and she felt Roxas give one of her hands a squeeze as Penny runs deeper into the dark. It’s too quiet in this space, the only sound being Penny’s terrified panting, and the lack of noise – no bugs, no wildlife, no rush of water – made Kairi’s nerves skyrocket even further.

Her heartbeat pounded loudly in her ears, and Kairi clutched at the fabric of Penny’s skirt, eyes darting around at the shadows. Where is it? Her mind hissed, where has it gone? What can we do? What’s going to happen.

Penny suddenly jerked to a stop, and her quiet gasp sounded horribly loud in the unnaturally quiet space. “Oh,” she whimpered, taking a hesitant step back, “oh no. The monster.”

Kairi looked up, and up, and up, and stared into towering, malleable shadows and burning red eyes.

Her Keyblade was in her hand before she realized it, and she heard Roxas quickly summon his own blades, the two of them staring up at this looming Nightmare. It moved, hovering over them, and its limbs slammed to the ground on either side of them. Kairi could see it slowly manifest, large, leathery bat wings coming into view, and she raised her Keyblade overhead, heart racing.

“Turn around and run, Penny.” Kairi demanded, lightning gathering in the air, “when I say, okay? Turn around and run.”

Roxas had picked up on what Kairi was about to do, and the electricity in the air increased, Kairi’s hair really standing up on end at this point, and she waited, staring up into those large, burning eyes.

“Now, Penny! Run!” Thunder ripped across the sky as they cast their spells, jagged streaks of lightning hitting the Nightmare squarely in the eyes. Electricity crackled across its form, and it jerked back with a screech, and Penny whirled around and sprinted back the way they came, wild eyed.

A wave rose out of the water as Penny streaked by, and she shrieked as something snapped out at her, snatching her up in its jaws. Once the water cleared, and she saw it was Brutus, her terror morphed into anger, and she scowled, furious. Brutus waddled ahead onto land as Nero scooped up Teddy into his jaws, and the two of them rumbled happily as they shoved plants aside, their prizes swinging in their grasp as they moved.

“Why d’you have to go and spoil everything?” Penny grumbled, taking a swipe at Brutus before pushing her hair out of her face. “Nero! Don’t you dare get my teddy bear wet!!”

The two crocodiles rumbled again, the sound akin to a chuckle, and made their way towards the water.

Which didn’t bode well for them at all.
“Roxas!!” Kairi hissed, eyes fixed on the water, “what do we do?? If we stay here, we drown!!”

“Do you think that Reflect spell would work??”

“I was joking, do you really think -?!”

“We have to try. Now. Now!!”

Brutus and Nero had slid into the water at this point, and Kairi cast a panicked Reflect just as the swamp water soaked Penny’s dress and closed over them. No water poured over their heads, and Kairi sent an awed look over to Roxas, only to find he had cast his own Reflect spell, face tight with concentration.

“I can’t believe this is working,” she whispered in disbelief. “How long do you think we can hold this?”

“As long as it takes,” Roxas grunted.

It was quiet, submerged as they were, the only sound reaching them being the quiet splashing of water as Penny was brought back to the river boat.

“So,” Kairi broke the silence, “that Nightmare, huh.”

“We’ve dealt with bigger, probably.”

“But not this big!! Especially when we’re like this, as tiny as we are –”

“- and we were able to protect Penny anyway.” Roxas finished. “Kairi. I promise we can do this.”

She gnawed on her lip and then took a moment to focus, breathing deeply and making sure their barrier spell held until they surfaced. “It’s just…hard.” She finally admitted, “seeing Penny go through this, but not be able to really do anything.”

“…I know.” Roxas finally said, “it’s not great, being limited like this. But we’ve gotta do what we can to help her, until someone comes to get her out of here.”

“Do you think… it’ll happen?” Kairi squeezed the handle of her Keyblade, “that someone will find one of her messages and come for her?”

The angle had changed as the moved, becoming more of a steep incline, and the sounds of water gave way to the scrape of claws against wood; they’d returned to the boat.

“I do.” Roxas answered, “with all my heart.”

The world suddenly flipped on them, and Kairi grunted as Roxas crashed into her, her back slamming against the joined barrier they made as Penny was flipped upside down.

“Bring her right on in, boys!” Mister Snoops called, and he cackled as Penny squirmed in Brutus’ grasp.

“So,” Mister Snoops continued, ”so, you tried to run away again, huh? Well, it didn’t work, did it?” Penny squirmed again, arms swinging, “put me down, Brutus!!”
Kairi’s teeth rattled in her head as Brutus let Penny drop to the floor, and even though Roxas was crushing her ribs, she didn’t release her Reflect spell until Penny rose to her feet, grumbling. “Cranky old dragon.”

After helping Roxas up, the two of them peeked out of their hiding place, watching Penny hold Teddy close to her chest. “There, there, Teddy. I won’t let them do that to you again. Don’t cry.”

She placed a kiss on the arm that was trapped in Nero’s teeth, and Mister Snoops rolled his eyes, holding his hands to his chest as he mocked her. “Oh, Teddy, Teddy, Teddy, poor Teddy – all she ever thinks about is that simple bear.”

He quickly skipped around the two crocodiles, throwing a wary eye at them, before getting in Penny’s space, shoving a finger in her face. “Now – you behave, or I’ll let Nero and Brutus have your old teddy bear.”

“You will not!” Penny pointed her finger right back at him, “besides, I’m not scared of ‘em like you are, Mister Snoops!”

Mister Snoops went splotchy with anger at that, “Don’t you sass me! Ah – boys, take this naughty little girl up to her room.”

He gave her a shove, sending her between Brutus and Nero towards the foot of the stairs, and Penny quickly straightened up, affronted. “I can go by myself. Thank you.”

She stomped her foot and whirled around, nose in the air as she strode up the stairs back to her room. As soon as she was out of sight, she was reaching for her pocket. “Roxas, Kairi, are you okay?!” She whispered, “we went in the water, I’m sorry!!”

She scooped them out of her pocket and gaped at them as they sat in the palm of her hand, perfectly dry. “We’re okay!” Kairi reassured her, “we’ve got special ways to make sure we didn’t get wet.”

Penny quickly closed the door behind her as they entered her room, placing them on her rickety bed. “Like the lightning?” She asked in whispers, “when we ran into the monster?”

“Exactly like the lightning.” Roxas grinned at her awed expression, “so we’ll be able to keep you safe from it, if we run into it again.”

“Even though you’re tiny mice?”

“Mm-hmm. Kairi and I, we’re really strong – we know how to deal with monsters like these, so we can protect you even though we’re so tiny.”

Their conversation was cut short by the sudden, rapid sounds of an organ, and the three of them listened to it, bemused.

“What on earth is going on down there?” Kairi asked, and Roxas shrugged, looking as confused as she felt. “Maybe they were in the mood for some music?” He guessed.

That theory was quickly debunked as the rapid, disjointed organ music ended with a spectacularly loud crash, followed by Medusa’s shrill yelling.
“Brutus! Nero!” she yelled, “Stop that infernal racket! I mean now!”

There was a beat of silence, and Medusa let out a high, rippling scream. “Snoops!” She shrieked, “Snoops!!! A mouse!! Oh, kill it, kill it!!”

A loud commotion rose up – heavy footsteps, yelling, the crash of breaking wood – and Kairi jumped when Medusa screamed again, louder than the first. “There’s another one!! Oh –!!”

All three of them weren’t prepared for the sound of *gunshots* that erupted from below in time with Medusa’s screaming. Kairi shared a stricken look with Roxas, wincing at the sounds of destruction below. “If that’s how she’s gonna react, then we definitely can’t get caught by her.” She hissed, shaken.

The quiet seemed especially striking after so much chaotic noise, and Penny slowly stood up from her crouch, staring dubiously at the door, wondering if it was safe. “Do you think it’s over?” Penny asked hesitantly, clutching Teddy to her chest.

“I think so.” Roxas answered, wrinkling his nose. “I can’t believe it – all that over some little mice?”

“Medusa seems like the kind of person to make a big deal out of little things.” Kairi mused as Penny cracked the door open, peeking out into the hallway before returning to her room.

“I’m gonna get ready to sleep,” she mumbled, “and brush my teeth.”

The two of them turned to give Penny privacy as she changed, and as she was pulling her nightgown over her head, Medusa’s voice echoed down the hall. “Penny, deaaaar! Auntie Medusa wants to talk to yoooou!”

Penny made a face at her trilling tone, and scooped Teddy up into her arms after finishing pulling her nightgown on. “I’ll go talk to her,” she whispered, “stay here Kairi, Roxas, okay?”

“Penny, wait –”

But she was gone, the door clicking shut behind her, and Kairi let her hand fall to her side. Sighing, she wrung her hands together, beginning to pace back and forth across the bed. “It’ll be okay, Kairi.” Roxas said, “She’s not going to do anything to Penny.”

She nodded, to let him know she heard him, but that didn’t loosen the knot in her chest, and she continued to pace across the bed. A soft snuffle alerted them to Penny’s return, and they hopped off the bed, running to the door that leads to the balcony outside just in time to see Penny slowly pass by, her face wet with tears.

“Oh my god,” Kairi said under her breath, “what happened? Penny?”

Penny didn’t respond, walking past them to lean on the railing of the balcony, sniffling as her shoulders shook with silent tears.

Kairi couldn’t bear to leave Penny alone to her misery, and she grabbed Roxas and pulled him to the balcony, the two of them carefully climbing up until the reached the ledge. “Oh, Penny,” Kairi said, reaching out to softly touch her arm, “what happened? What did she say?”
She sniffled, her face red and blotchy, “she said….I’m not ever gonna get ‘dopted…’cause I’m not pretty…”

Kairi’s heart twisted at her words, and she sighed softly, taking a seat near Penny’s elbow. Roxas sat next to her, and the three of them looked out across the swamp, watching a doe stand vigil as her fawn nibbled at the grass.

“Did you know that I was adopted?” Kairi finally asked, still looking out at the scenery, and Penny turned towards her somewhat, still sniffling. “…you were?”

“I was. I lost my family when I was very young and washed up in this entirely new place. I couldn’t remember…anything about my previous family, and I was scared that no one would ever take me in. But then I met my dad.”

She smiled at the thought of him, and the stab of homesickness that shot through her made her miss the islands keenly.

“I didn’t know if I’d ever have a family again,” she continued quietly, “but with my dad….I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

Further away, one of the many stars in the sky began to shine, brighter than all the others, and the light reflected the growing hope in Penny’s eyes.

“Don’t worry.” Kairi smiled, “you’ll find a family that loves you. Of course you will, you’re amazing! Just keep the faith.”

“Can’t touch it, or buy it, or wrap it up tight,” Penny whispered to herself, “but it’s there just the same, making things turn out right.”

Her eyes were still a little watery, but at least she was smiling, somewhat, as she picked Kairi and Roxas up and placed them on her shoulder, cradling Teddy to her chest as she made her way back into her room.

After putting the two mice back onto her bed, Penny placed a sleeping cap on Teddy’s head and tucked the bear into bed, placing a kiss on its cheek. “Goodnight, Teddy. Sleep tight. Oh!” She jumped a little, remembering something, and then pulled Teddy from under the covers, folding the stuffed paws together. “We almost forgot to say our prayers!”

Blowing out the little candle in her room, Penny folded her hands together and closed her eyes as Kairi and Roxas took a seat at the foot of her bed, leaning into the pillows.

“Please bless Rufus, and Teddy, and all the kids at the orphanage – Jennifer, Bobby, Mary, and Julie. Thank you again for me meeting Kairi and Roxas, because they’re good at fighting monsters and they’re really nice. Please let someone find my bottle – there’s a message in it – because running away isn’t working. Amen.”

Penny let out a shaky sigh, and she picked up Teddy, her eyes looking watery again. “Don’t worry, Teddy,” she said, voice trembling, ”we’ll – we’ll be alright.”

Her face crumpled, and tears slipped down her cheeks as she shoved her head into her folded arms, sniffling into her blankets. Kairi was about to get up and make her way towards her, when
movement at the top of the pillows made her stop, scooting backwards until she bumped into Roxas.

Two mice slid down from the top of Penny’s pillow and made their way towards her. One mouse - rather elegant looking, with a purple scarf tied around her neck and a matching hat – reached out and touched her hand, while the other mouse – rather portly, in a soft red sweater – stood next to them, taking their cap off and holding it close.

“Penny,” the elegant mouse said in a soft, accented voice. “Penny.”

She patted her hand, and Penny looked up with a sniff, new tears clinging to her lashes, eyes widening as she took the two mice in. “…Yes?”

“Penny, dear, now don’t cry.” She smiled, gesturing to herself and her partner, “we are here to help you.”

“We…” another tear streaked down Penny’s cheek, and she held Teddy close, “…hi! Where’d you come from? Did you come for Kairi and Roxas, too?”

“Kairi and – who?” The other mouse spoke this time, his voice low and confused, “no, we -we found the bottle with, with your message. And we’ve come to rescue you.”

*That* really brightened up Penny’s mood, and she grinned, giving Teddy a squeeze. “Did you hear that, Teddy? Our bottle worked!! Kairi, Roxas, the bottle worked!”

By now the two new mice were looking *very* confused, and Kairi knew it was time to introduce themselves. “That’s great, Penny!” Kairi said, slowly scooting out of her hiding spot with Roxas behind the pillows, “I knew someone would come for you.”

Roxas soon followed her, and the two mice looked stunned at their appearance, mouths open as they moved forward to stand near Penny.

“Oh, but –” Penny frowned now, thinking, “didn’t you bring somebody big with you? Like the police?”

“Ah…no. No, it’s – it’s just the two of us.” The mouse in red wrung his hands together anxiously, but his partner quickly moved forward, grabbing his hand and Penny’s nightgown. “Yes, but if we all work together, and have a little faith –”

“That’s what Rufus said!” Penny exclaimed, “faith makes things turn out right.”

The mouse in red had begun to climb up Penny’s pillow, heading towards the window, “Penny, I know it’s late, but we have to escape tonight. Right now.”

Kairi frowned at that, and Roxas stepped forward, “but – what are you talking about, she can’t –”

“But I just got caught by Brutus and Nero!” Penny protested, lifting her nightgown to show them the teeth marks in her clothing, “Look at what they did to my pants!!”

“Yeah.” He was at the window now, peering out between the broken glass and staring down below, “and they’re, they’re still down there guarding the gangplank.”
His partner bristled at that, placing her hands on her hips, “oooh, those vicious monsters. They ought to be locked up in a cage!”

The mention of a cage made Penny’s eyes light up with an idea. “I know, I know!” she said in an excited whisper, waving them forward, “come on, I’ll show you!”

She headed back out towards the balcony, and led them all to some stairs, pointing downward. There, at the foot of the stairs, sat a very large elevator, doors open, unused. “See there?” she whispered, as the mouse in red hopped down the stairs and ran towards it, “the elevator.”

“Oh, it’s a perfect cage, Penny!”

He investigated the elevator, looking around the space before nodding in approval. “Great idea. Now wha- what can we use for bait?”

“Aw,” Penny shrugged, “they’ll eat anything.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said darkly, and Kairi wondered if these mice were the cause of the earlier fuss that happened downstairs.

“I’ve got it!” the mouse in purple hopped down the stairs, and Penny quickly followed them, Roxas and Kairi in tow. Reaching into her satchel, the mouse pulled out a small bottle of perfume, holding it up triumphantly. “My perfume! They’ll follow the scent right into the elevator!”

“And I’ll slam the door!” Penny happily volunteered, nose wrinkling. “And would that make Medusa mad.”

Looking around, Penny picked up a broom that was lying on the floor and then placed a hand on her hip, mimicking one of Medusa’s stances. “Brutus! Nero! Did you let that little brat escape again!” She mimed lifting the broom, ready to swing, before pointing at the two mice in the elevator, squinting. “You’re too soft.”

Kairi couldn’t help but laugh as Penny took the broom, pretending to hit something, saying ‘whap! Whap!’ in time with her swings, and the other mice laughed as well.

“Hey, Penny, that’s not bad.”

“That’s exactly like Medusa!”

Throwing the broom over her shoulder, Penny began to strut, swinging her hips exactly like Medusa, and Roxas sputtered out a laugh as Penny looked over her shoulder, making a face. “Track her down, boys. Bring her back!”

“And we’ll be so far ahead, they’ll never catch us!” the mouse in purple said, exultant, though her partner quickly frowned with worry, placing a hand to his chin as he thought. “Wait a minute…she might catch us in, in her swamp-mobile.”

Penny’s face scrunched up as she considered this, and then she burst out, “we’ll swipe it!! I’ve always wanted to drive it.” She began to blow raspberries, mimicking driving the swamp-mobile, and Kairi felt her heart swell up at Penny’s enthusiasm, glad that she was able to find hope in the most unexpected duo.
“Wh-what if Medusa wakes up while we’re starting it?” the mouse protested, “we-we’re in trouble. W-we’ve gotta stall ‘em somehow.”

“How ‘bout Mister Snoops fireworks?” Penny asked, leaning towards the two mice in whispers, “we’ll shoot ‘em off in her bedroom – that’ll keep her busy!!”

“Oh, Bernard,” the other mouse burst out, shaking her partner by the arm, “it’s so exciting! Perfume, crocs, swamp-mobiles!” She twirled with an excited laugh at their plan, “it’s just got to work!”

“It’s our only chance,” Bernard said, “but we’re gonna need help –”

“Snoops!!” Everyone froze at the sound of Medusa’s yell, at Snoops’ rapid, heavy footsteps as he stumbled down the stairs. “Snoops, get down here!!”

“Uh, wh-what’s up, Medusa? What’s going on?”

“Oh, shut up! High tide or not –”

A door slammed, and the air was filled with a ringing silence as everyone held their breath, waiting a moment. The five of them headed towards the stairs Snoops tumbled down, listening to their muffled voices.

“I bet those two are up to something,” Penny whispered, nervously gripping the wood of the banister, “I don’t want to go down that awful black hole again.”

“Don’t worry about that, dear,” the mouse in purple soothed as Bernard moved away, calling for someone named Evinrude, “you must hurry and get dressed.”

“Oh.” Penny shrunk back a little as she remembered something, “Kairi, Roxas. The monster.”

Roxas’ looked a little relieved that someone finally remembered, and Kairi grabbed his hand and pulled him up, the two of them climbing onto Penny’s knees.

Her words ‘caught the attention of the other two mice, and they stepped close as well. “Wh-what do you mean, a monster?” Bernard asked nervously. “Bianca, you don’t think –”

Kairi sighed a little at finally getting her name as Bianca placed a hand on Bernard’s shoulder. “Didn’t Miss Ellie – Mae say something about a – a thing, further into the swamp?”

“I sent Evinrude to let them all know we’re ready to go, but – Bianca, there’s nothing we can do about a, a monster, we –”

“Kairi and Roxas can do it,” Penny piped up, “I’ve seen it. They’re really strong.”

Kairi smiled up at Penny, placing a hand on one of her knuckles as Roxas faced Bianca and Bernard. “We can do it,” he agreed, “we can hold it off while you escape.”

“Who are you two?” Bianca finally asked, curious, “did the Rescue Society send you, too?”

“Ah…no.” Kairi shook her head, “we’re here because we- we’re looking for someone. And in our searching, we found Penny.”

“We couldn’t just leave her here alone with these people, so we just –” Roxas shrugged, “– decided
to stay. Until someone came for her.”

Bianca looked between the two of them, touched, and Bernard frowned, obviously doubtful that they would be able to fight a full-blown monster. “You’re just two mice,” he said, incredulous, “you – you can’t fight a monster.”

“Well, you two are mice, too!” Kairi shot back, “and yet you came all this way to save Penny. We can do it.”

“But…” Penny hesitated, “Kairi, Roxas, I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Penny, you have to.” Roxas insisted, “Bianca and Bernard can get you out of here, and we can keep you safe so you can escape. Okay?”

Penny obviously didn’t like the sound of things, but she nodded anyway, reluctant. “It’ll be okay, Penny,” Bernard said bracingly. “Once Evinrude comes back with everyone, we’ll get the plan going and get you out of here. It’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

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They waited all night, eventually returning to Penny’s room as the anxiously waited for the remainder of Bianca and Bernard’s rescue party.

But they never came.

Instead, as the room slowly filled with the pale light of dawn, Snoops came instead. “Alright, girl,” he said, “get dressed. You’re getting that diamond today.”

Penny got dressed slowly, reluctantly, and picked the four mice up with shaky hands, placing them in her skirt pocket before picking up Teddy, holding the bear tight to her chest. As soon as she left her room, Snoops grabbed her by the wrist, dragging her down the stairs, and Medusa was already waiting by the doors, coat on and cane in hand.

“Good morning, Penny!” Medusa sang, “ready to find me my diamond today?”

They dragged her to the cave, and Penny dug her heels in every step of the way, trying to yank her arm out of Snoops’ tight grip. Once they got to the dark entrance to the cave, Snoops whirled around, waving a finger in Penny’s face. “Alright, you little brat,” he warned, “Now you are gonna go down in that hole, and you are gonna dig until you find me the diamond. You understand that? And no sassing me.”

Penny scowled, her small hand curling into a fist, and Medusa swooped in, placing a hand on her back. “Ah, ah, ah!” Medusa sang, “Snoops, that is no way to speak to our little Miss Penny.”

She wrapped Penny up in her arms, smooshing her cheek against hers, and Snoops looked back as he grabbed the bucket, rope in hand. “Oh – what? Oh…okay, boss, okay.”

“Now, my dear,” Medusa continued, squishing Penny’s cheeks in her hands, “you’re going to find the big, shiny diamond for your Auntie Medusa, aren’t you?”
The rope squeaked in its hinges as Mister Snoops prepared the bucket, and Penny looked down into the cave, paling slightly. “Teddy doesn’t like it down there,” she said, holding the bear and taking a few steps back until she bumped into Medusa, “he’s afraid. Aren’t you, Teddy?”

“Aww.” Medusa ‘tsk’d, shaking her head, “poor Teddy.”

Her hand moved, a rapid blur, and Medusa snatched Penny’s bear out of her arms. “I’ll just keep him up here with me, where he’ll be safe!”

“Give me back my teddy bear!” Penny lunged at Medusa, trying to grab the bear she was holding out of reach. “He’s mine! He’s mine!!” Scowling, Medusa pressed her boot against Penny’s chest, and with a rough shove, pushed her over towards the mouth of the cave. Penny stumbled, grasping onto the rocks behind her, and a loose pebble tumbled down, echoing in the cave.

The four mice clutched at each other, hearts pounding, and Penny shook at how close she was to falling into the cave. Medusa loomed over her, Penny’s bear clutched tightly in her hand. “You get down there,” she snarled, “and find the big diamond, or you will never see that teddy again.”

Her voice was wild, unhinged, and Penny stared at her with wide, terrified eyes. Nodding, she grabbed the rope, “alright, alright,” she said, her voice tiny as she lowered herself into the bucket, “I’ll go.”

With slow, jerky pulls, Penny was slowly lowered down into the cave. “Boss, you sure got a way with kids,” they heard Snoops praise, and Kairi scowled up at him.

“Don’t worry, Teddy,” Penny called, “I won’t be gone long. I’ll find her old diamond.”

As they made their way to the ground, Kairi and Roxas clambered after Bianca and Bernard as they crawled out of Penny’s pocket, sliding down the rope and hopping to the ground. “Oh, what a dreadful, frightening place!” Bianca said, placing a hand to her mouth as she looked around.

“Yeah. It used to be a pirate’s cave.” Penny was already moving, grabbing the lantern attached to the rope and moving further into the cave, Kairi and Roxas at her heels.

“How do you know that, Penny?”

“Him!” She pointed, raising her lantern, and Bianca gasped loudly as the light ran over the skeletal remains of a pirate, a sword lodged between his ribs.

Bernard was already moving, grabbing a spoon and beginning to dig into the wet sands. “Come on, let’s- let’s look for her diamond so we can get out of here!”

“Oh, I looked there already.” Penny stopped him, “Medusa doesn’t want those little ones.”

A loud rumbling and splashing filled the air, and the earth beneath them shook ominously, rattling the stones and jewels in the cave. “Wh-” Bernard stuttered, turning towards the source of the noise – a large, black hole a few feet away, “what’s – what – wh- what’s that?”

“That’s where the water comes in.” Penny shuddered, “I’m afraid to go over there.”

“Well…” Bernard mused, a thoughtful hand on his chin, “if I was a pirate…that’s just where I’d
hide the Devil’s Eye! I’ll, uh - I’ll go over there and, and check it out.”

Bernard strode over to the edge of the large hole, staring down into it, and the water hissed and spit, gurgling loudly.

“…Come to think of it,” he backtracked, stepping away from the edge, “if – if I were a pirate, I, I wouldn’t hide anything over there –”

“Bernard!” Bianca ran up to him, pointing at something on the other side of the large hole, “I can see something!”

Penny, Kairi, and Roxas stepped closer to the edge of the hole, trying to see what Bianca had pointed at as she ran ahead, moving towards the large ledges of rocks on the sides. “Come on, come on, let’s see what it is!!”

“That doesn’t look safe,” Roxas whispered to Kairi as Bernard stopped Bianca, placing a hand on her arm as he moved forward instead. “I’ll see if I can find a safe way over;” he insisted, already climbing across the rocks, and Kairi and Roxas moved to stand with Bianca, nervously watching Bernard make his way across.

The ground shook again as a sudden rush of water erupted from the hole, sending a flood of water over the ground. Kairi skittered back with Bianca, grabbing onto Roxas’, and the three of them pressed close against the wall until the water receded.

“Bianca!!” Bernard yelled, terrified, and Bianca gasped loudly as she saw him, knocked off the edge and scrabbling onto the rocks, trying to hold on as he slowly lost his grip.

“Hang on!!” Bianca called, quickly darting over the rocks, and Kairi ran after her, Roxas quickly bringing up the rear as they went to help Bianca pull Bernard back up.

“Help!!” he called again, his voice thin with fear as he slid further down.

“I’m coming!!” Bianca grabbed one of Bernard’s arms and Kairi grabbed the other, Roxas gripping onto his sweater and helping pull him up the rest of the way once he was within reach.

“What are you doing down there?” Medusa called down, voice echoing throughout the cave.

“I’m looking!!” Penny called back, frowning.

“Well look faster.”

Penny made a face, and Kairi made her way across the rocks to the other side of the hole, curious to see whatever it was Bianca was pointing at. Roxas quickly followed behind her, and Bianca and Bernard came up at the rear, carefully making their way across until they reached the other side.

The four of them moved into the dark shadows of the cave, ducking under the dirt encrusted blade of a sword, and then split in different directions, hoping to cover more ground and find the diamond. Kairi was poking at a large treasure chest, wondering if she should use her Keyblade to unlock it when the room was filled with a bright, dazzling light.

“Wow!!” Bernard exclaimed, rubbing at his eyes as multiple rainbow facets danced across the
rocks. They looked around, confused, and the facets faded away as Penny turned, shining her lantern in a different direction.

“P-Penny, hold, hold your lantern up again!” Bernard moved towards a skull wedged between the rocks, peering into the massive eye socket, and as Penny held up her lantern again, the room was once again filled with that stunning, colorful light.

“Holy Mackerel, that – that’s it!”

Kairi climbed up with Bianca, and Roxas moved next to Bernard as the four of them stared at the largest diamond Kairi has ever seen, the inside of the skull full of the lavender light the diamond was giving off.

“The Devil’s Eye,” Bianca cried happily, “Penny – we found it! We found it!”

“Medusa,” Penny called out, moving back towards the entrance to the cave, “I found it!”

There was a fuss, but Kairi ignored it, climbing into the skull with Bernard and Bianca. Bernard began to shove at the diamond, trying to push it towards the eye socket, and after Roxas stepped in to help, the diamond moved forward, scraping against the bone.

Once it got closer to the eye socket, Bianca and Kairi grabbed it, and the four of them attempted to pull it through. Penny anxiously watched on the other side, but jumped back as more water flooded the space, filling the skull with water and pushing the diamond back. Kairi heard Roxas and Bernard sputter against the water, and grunt as they pushed the diamond back towards the socket.

Kairi and Bianca grabbed it again, but no matter how much they pulled, the diamond wouldn’t budge.

“It – it won’t go through!” Bernard finally grunted, “we can’t get it out!”

“What is taking so long?” Medusa called down again, irritated, and Penny turned away. “It’s stuck tight!” She called up, cupping her mouth to make sure she was heard.

“Stuck tight?” Medusa repeated, incredulous, “you get that diamond, or you’ll never see daylight again!!”

Penny’s lip trembled a little before she set her jaw, and Kairi’s stomach dropped as Penny began to slowly make her way across the wet rocks towards them. “No,” Bernard yelled, aghast, “No, no, back! Back, Penny!”

“Penny, no!”

The cave shook again, the large geyser hissing and spitting with water, and Kairi felt like she was about to throw up, utterly helpless as Penny determinedly made her way towards them.

“Oh, Penny!” Bianca cried out, horrified, “you’ll fall!!”

Her foot slipped on the wet rocks, and Penny shrieked as she lost her footing, tumbling into the hole. She scrambled against the rocks, trying to pull herself up, just as a wave of water erupted, bigger than the last ones. Penny scrambling towards them, pulling herself out of the water, was the
last thing Kairi saw before a wave knocked them over, shoving the four of them into the skull. Kairi whirled and tumbled around, struggling to hold her breath as she slammed into various bodies, quickly gathering her bearings and swimming for the surface as the water slowly drained. Penny looked terrified, and she grabbed at the skull and frantically began to pull, trying to dislodge it. “F-forget the diamond!!” Bernard sputtered, “let’s get out of here before we drown -!!”

More water slammed into them, and Penny was almost dragged away, pulled by the water into that deep, dangerous black hole. Kairi clutched at Roxas as the water drained out of the skull again, coughing and sputtering, and she heard Penny call out, terrified. “The water’s coming in!!” She pleaded up at Medusa, “please pull me up!!”

“Not until you get the diamond!!” Kairi isn’t sure she’s ever hated someone so much in her life, and she burned with it, her glare cutting through the rocks, hoping that Medusa felt it, somehow. “Penny!!” Bernard called out as the rest of the water drained from the skull, “Penny, the-the pirate sword, use the sword!!”

Pushing herself to her feet, Penny quickly grabbed the large sword and shoved it between the skull’s teeth, prying its jaw open. The diamond tumbled into the new space, and as Penny pried the mouth open, leaning all her weight on the sword, the four of them pushed, and heaved, and pulled until slowly, slowly, the diamond was shoved from the skull’s jaws and tumbled into the water. Penny dived for it, splashing through the water, and scooped it up just as another wave of water rushed in and washed them all away.

Water filled her nose, her ears, and Kairi couldn’t make sense of what was up or down, the tide quickly rushing in and filling the cave. The lantern that Penny had with her was soon doused by the waves, trapping them in darkness, and Kairi cried out, terrified. This is it, she thought wildly, we’re going to die. Penny is going to die. I –

“Kairi!” Roxas slammed into her, and Kairi gripped onto him as tight as she could, arms tight around his neck as they spun around, caught in a whirlpool. He held her just as tightly, and Kairi’s breath came out in loud, gasping sobs, struggling to keep their heads above water. “Penny!!” She heard Bianca call weakly, “Penny, help!!”

Kairi felt a hand snatch her up, and she kept clinging to Roxas as she slammed into Bianca and Bernard, Penny trying to hold them aloft as they spun rapidly in the whirlpool, pulled in deeper and deeper by the water. Kairi let a final weak scream as the water closed over their heads, and it was dark, so dark, and she couldn’t tell what was up or down, if they’d ever get out of this spinning whirlpool or if they’d be trapped here, drowning –

Sora, she thought faintly, I’m sorry. I couldn’t bring you home, I’m sorry. Naminè….Dad….Riku –!
A rush of water heaved them up, sending them flying towards the bucket, and Kairi took in a deep gulp of air as Penny frantically threw the diamond in. “I’ve got it!!” she called out, scrambling into the bucket, “I’ve got it!! Hurry!! Pull- pull me up!!”

They were quickly yanked up, higher and higher, and Penny quickly placed the large diamond into Medusa’s waiting, clutching hands.

“At last!!!” she cried out, exultant, “The Devil’s Eye!!”

Snoops began to move in, clamoring to see the diamond, and Kairi tuned them out, still clinging to Roxas and trying to calm her racing heart.

-0-

“….If either of you try to follow me…you’ll get blasted!”

Kairi must have passed out, because she suddenly came to to Roxas still holding onto her, face grim as they were jostled by Penny’s movements. Bianca and Bernard were nowhere to be seen, and Kairi groaned quietly, pushing herself upright as Roxas’ eyes darted down to her.

“Alright?” He quietly asked, and she nodded, rising to poke out of Penny’s pocket to see what was going on.

Penny and Snoops were standing up against the wall in Penny’s makeshift room, staring down the barrel of a shotgun that Medusa was pointing at them, Penny’s bear still tight in her grasp.

“You give me my teddy bear!” Penny demanded, not caring about the gun aimed at her as she walked towards Medusa, arms outstretched. “You promised!”

Medusa shoved her foot against Penny’s middle, pushing her away as she nuzzled her cheek against Penny’s bear. “Teddy goes with me, my dear,” she said smugly, “I’ve become quite…attached to him.”

Laughing, Medusa began to step back towards the door to make her escape, gun still aimed at the two of them, but her laughter quickly turned into screams as she suddenly tripped. The gun went off in her hands as she fell, misfiring, and Penny’s bear tumbled out of her grasp, landing onto the wood with a soft ‘thump’.

Penny was running before Kairi realized what had happened, scooping up her teddy bear and darting away.

“My diamond!!” Medusa shrieked at her back, “my diamond!!!”

As Penny continued running, Kairi heard a group of voices cry out: “charge!!!” and Medusa begin to scream. Penny didn’t dare look back, sprinting for the lower decks of the riverboat and wincing as the sound of gunshots filled the air.

Soon the swmp-mobile came into view, and Penny threw herself onto it, placing Teddy into the seat next to her before scooping Kairi and Roxas out of her pocket.
Penny turned the key as hard as she could, and the swamp-mobile rumbled and stuttered beneath them but didn’t start.

“Look out!!”

Penny looked up at Bernard’s voice, just as a blast of shotgun fire rang through the air, the windshield of the swamp-mobile getting blown out by a shot meant for Penny’s head.

Kairi watched as a small muskrat in a pink smock leaped onto Medusa’s head as she tried to aim at them again, taking a rolling pin and whacking her in the head with all her might. Medusa’s shotgun whirled, finding a new target, and the muskrat scattered as shots filled the air.

“Oh, please start,” Penny begged the swamp-mobile, turning the key again and again, and Kairi climbed down into the engine of the swamp-mobile, where Bernard was tinkering with a mole, trying to get it to start.

“Advance the spark!” He called out, and Kairi covered her ears as loud honk filled the air. “Not the horn!!” Bernard yelled, irritated, “the spark lever!! Digger, hold this –” he handed a cord to the mole that ended with two metal prongs. “-It’s that doohickey on the steering wheel!!”

They must have hit the right thing, because suddenly Digger was alight with sparks, the light on his hat blowing out at the force of the electricity.

High whistles filled the air, and Kairi climbed up to investigate in time to see the morning air filled with fireworks, colorful sparks outlining the forms of the hundreds of bats flittering in the air, explosions arcing across the boat.

Penny tried the key once again as the remaining swamp party gathered around the swamp-mobile, and Bernard finally discovered the problem. “We’re not getting any gas!!” He called out, and the muskrat turned to the sleepy looking mouse at her side. “Fill her up, Luke!!”

Kairi climbed back up to Roxas’ side as Luke began to pour liquid from the jug he was holding into the gas valve, and even from the distance she was at, the smell of it brought tears to Kairi’s eyes.

“Hurry! All of it!” The muskrat ran up, pouring all the contents of the jug in, and the swamp-mobile started up with a roar and a flume of smoke. The swamp-mobile took off just as Medusa reached them, and she leaped for them, wild eyed, grabbing onto the rope attached to the boat.

She slowly pulled her way up onto the swamp-mobile, but before she could get a good grip to climb onto the boat, the muskrat was there, whacking her across the fingers with her rolling pin and sending her flying.

Medusa wouldn’t let go, no matter how much Penny tried to shake her off, and as the river boat exploded in a plume of colorful sparks, Kairi had had enough.

“Look out!” Bianca cried, “the riverboat!!”

As Penny whipped the swamp-mobile around, turning them back the way they came, Kairi summoned her Keyblade, and with a vicious yell, she cut the rope and sent Medusa splashing towards the ruined boat, skipping like a stone across the water.
The boat erupted with cheers, and Bianca wrapped Bernard up into a hug as the swamp-mobile sped away, leaving Medusa behind.

“Kairi!!” Roxas pointed up at the sky, “look. The bats.”

She looked up to where Roxas was pointing, and she saw that the swarm of bats in the sky had increased, black silhouettes and bright red eyes looming over them.

With a jolt, Kairi remembered the monster – the Nightmare in the woods, its shapeless black body and burning eyes, leathery bat wings forming on either side of them – and she went cold.

“They’ve gotta get out of here.” Kairi whispered, before raising her voice, “Bianca! Bernard! Make sure you get Penny out of here, okay?! The bats –!”

“Kairi! Roxas!” Bianca cried out, “get down!!!”

The bats had dived, swarming the swamp-mobile, and Kairi screamed when she felt something yank at the back of her jacket, lifting her off the ground.

“Kairi!!” Roxas quickly dispelled Oblivion and leaped for her, hand outstretched, and Kairi reached back with all her might. His hand tightly grabbed onto her wrist, and she scrabbled at him, wrapping her fingers around his wrist and holding on with all her strength as the bats carried them away.

She couldn’t see anything except the swarming, amorphous black bodies of the bats, their red eyes bright against their shadowy forms, burning streaks as they moved rapidly around them. Kairi was beginning to wonder where the bats would take them, what they would have to do, when they were suddenly dropped, and Kairi felt her stomach slam into her throat as they fell.

Kairi let out a choked scream as they slammed into the dirt, and she quickly helped Roxas up as got back to their feet, Keyblades ready as they took in their surroundings.

They were back in that place where they first saw the Nightmare, but deeper – thrown into the heart of the Nightmare’s vast nest. The silence here was crushing, not one hint of wildlife to be found, and Kairi’s heart raced in her ears as she took in her surroundings – the various glittering objects lining the space, coins and gems and broken colorful bottles, old trinkets and glasses and –

Kairi clutched at Roxas’ sleeve when she felt it, her loud gasp echoing across the unnaturally silent space.

“Sora,” she breathed, “oh my god, Sora’s here. Roxas, we’ve –”

“I know.” His eyes darted around, trying to find it, “we’ve gotta find him, before –”

High screams cut him off as the bats descended, twisting, slowly coalescing into the Nightmare’s large original form.

The force of its leathery wings hitting the ground shook the earth, clawed appendages clawing into the dirt as it lowered its head, appraising them with its burning eyes. It towered over them, leagues tall, and its eyes rolled around in its head, upturned nose sniffing the air as its wide, wide mouth stretched into a fanged smile. It screamed, and the sound rang in Kairi’s ears, but she didn’t falter,
falling back into a ready stance and gripping her Keyblade tight.

“You ready, Roxas?” Kairi called out, eyes hard as she considered where she wanted to land her first hit.

“Ready!” Roxas twirled Oathkeeper and Oblivion around with a wide grin. “Let’s go!!”

And with a joined cry, they charged.

Jumping up, they struck at it at the same time – Kairi landing a hit across its large nose, and Roxas viciously slashing at one of its crimson eyes. It screamed, rearing up, and flapped its mighty wings, sending a gust of wind at them so strong it sent them flying.

Kairi’s breath left her in a harsh wheeze as she scraped across the ground, rolling to a stop with a groan. She could hear the Nightmare crashing through the trees, making its way towards them, and Kairi staggered to her feet, wobbling a little as she regained her balance before running out to meet the Nightmare halfway.

Roxas was already there, darting in to strike at it as he dodged its sweeping wings and bite attacks. One wing caught him and sent him flipping into the air, but he used that momentum, flipping his Keyblades into a reverse grip and bringing them down, screaming, into one of the Nightmare’s wings, tearing two large gashes into it as he fell back to earth.

The scream it let out was ghastly, and as the Nightmare flapped its good wing the screams changed, sonic pulses joining the huge wave of wind its one wing was able to generate and pushing Roxas away. He tumbled through the air, clutching at his ears, so small, and Kairi ran up to meet him, grunting as he slammed into her, sending them both to the ground.

He blinked up at her, dazed, and blood was leaking out of his ears, matting his golden fur. Swearing under her breath, Kairi quickly grabbed a Potion, shoving the healing liquid down his throat before she cast a Fire spell, making the Nightmare keep its distance. The fire landed near its eye, and quickly began to spread across its shadow-like fur, the magical flames licking across its body, growing madly.

The Nightmare thrashed against the flames, wildly flapping its wings, and it howled, throwing its head back before it exploded, bursting into hundreds of bats, swarming angrily.

Kairi quickly pulled Roxas to his feet, and the two of them stared at the rising tide of bats, preparing to dive at them, and Kairi’s heart burned.

“Roxas.” She turned to him, eyes bright, “I just got the craziest idea. You trust me?”

Roxas threw one more look up at the bats before giving Kairi a sharp nod, and she grinned wildly. “Okay. When I say, we’re gonna cast Aeroga. Okay?”

They pressed up against each other, back to back, and Kairi held her Keyblade high, eyes locked on the writing cloud of bats high above them. The cloud dived, quickly gaining speed, closer and closer, and Kairi waited until they were mere feet away before screaming “now!!!”

The wind tore at her hair, at her clothes, and Kairi watched as their combined Aeroga spells turned into a wild vortex of wind, surrounding them and sucking up the bats. They spun around them,
struggling futilely to escape from the strong slipstreams of wind, and Kairi yelled over the gusts, “we’re gonna set them on fire!! Do it now!!”

Two rings of fire surrounded them, quickly getting caught up by the wind, and Kairi’s heart burned brighter and brighter, hoping that her plan worked as she pressed a hand to her chest and called with all she had.

Light flared beneath her palm, and suddenly her dragon, her Dream Eater was there, bursting from the flames with a loud cry. It flapped its wings as it spun around them, buoyed by the wind, and aided Roxas’ flames with a powerful gust of Dragon’s Fire.

The vortex of wind surrounding them lit up, bathing them in heat and colorful streaks of flames, and the air vibrated with hundreds upon hundreds of screams as one by one, pieces of the Nightmare died out.

By the time their fire tornado vanished, that unnatural stillness was gone, the quiet and shadows replaced with the loud cries of bugs, the quiet lapping of water, and pale beams of sunlight. Her Dream Eater had vanished with the flames, and Kairi leaned heavily against Roxas’ back, panting, the two of them giving themselves a moment to absorb the lightness that entered the air.

They had done it.

Kairi laughed weakly, completely exhausted, “I can’t believe that worked!”

“Kairi, that was absolutely insane.” Roxas gently elbowed her in the ribs, “just -completely nuts. It was so cool.”

Their laughter echoed in the air, and Kairi finally looked down, taking in the freed swamp, the trinkets littered across the ground glittering in the faint light.

“Oh.” Roxas’ voice was hushed, grabbing Kairi’s hand and tugging her around so she stood next to him. “Oh. Kairi, look.”

A few feet away, lying in a beam of sunlight at the base of a tree, was a Keyblade, its gold handle shining in the weak rivulets of light.

The Kingdom Key.

Kairi felt like she was about to be sick, heart slamming in her chest as she gripped at Roxas’ hand, the only thing keeping her upright. Snoops fireworks were still going off near the direction of the riverboat, colors streaking across the sky as they scrambled towards Sora’s Keyblade.

It was enormous, three times their size, and Kairi silently despaired, wondering how they’d be able to get it out of here.

More fireworks popped overhead, and Kairi looked up at them in time to see the sparkling lights form into a keyhole.

“Roxas.” Kairi pointed up, getting his attention, “the Sleeping Keyhole. It’s time.”
She looked at him stricken, “how are we going to do this?” she asked. “We can’t carry the
Kingdom Key, it’s too big. But I just – we can’t –”

“Kairi.” Roxas smiled, “it’s okay. Trust me, alright? We’re gonna grab the handle of the Keyblade,
come on.”

Dispelling Oblivion, Roxas placed one hand of the hilt of Sora’s Keyblade, holding it as tight as his
small hands could allow. “You too, Kairi.”

Biting her lip, Kairi slowly placed her hand over Roxas’, still unsure about how this would work.
Sora’s Keyblade thrummed under their hands, warmer than any of the other fragments they’d
found. “Alright. Ready?”

No, she thought to herself, but she still raised her Keyblade as one with Roxas and watched the twin
beams of light race towards the Keyhole and unlock with a resounding ‘click’ across the sky.
Beneath their hands, the Kingdom Key flashed with light.

The ground gave way beneath Kairi’s feet, and they were falling.

It wasn’t a quick, rapid fall, wind screaming in her ears as they descended – it was weightless,
floaty, and the way light rippled around her made her feel like they were at the bottom of the
ocean.

Her Keyblade was gone, vanishing during their descent, and the only thing that saved Kairi from
completely falling into a panic was the Kingdom Key in her hand, and Roxas’ fingers overlapping
with hers, holding onto their last fragment just as tightly as she was. Looking at their joined hands,
Kairi realized that she was staring at their regular hands, back in their normal forms as they fell to
their unknown destination.

Suddenly, a faint, blue light appeared beneath them, and Kairi and Roxas twisted around, their
movements still floaty, dream-like, as they took in what waited for them below.

Once it came into view, Kairi’s eyes rapidly filled with tears, blurring the image beneath them.

A tall, glowing pillar of stained glass waited below, glowing with an ethereal blue light, and the
two of them took in the image of Sora, so young, Keyblade in hand and fast asleep.

Kairi swiped at her eyes, and the two of them landed on the glass with barely a noise, Roxas giving
her hand a squeeze as they took a closer look. The entire station was littered with cracks, fissures
giving way to large gaps where pieces are missing, and Kairi’s heart ached at the sight.

“How – what do we do?” Her voice echoed in the space, and she turned to Roxas, squeezing her
hands over her heart. “How do we -?”

Still holding onto the Kingdom Key, Roxas blindly reached into his pack, and rummaged around
until he pulled out – a charm. It was a silvery, crystalline pod, the chamber surrounded by
blooming petals, making it look similarly to a flower. It was attached to a silver chain, and Roxas
stared down at it, his expression unreadable.

Suddenly, he smiled, and the expression was horribly sad. “Sora,” he sighed, “we’ve got nothing but sad memories about each other, don’t we?”

Crouching to his knees, Roxas placed the charm of Sora’s memory pod over one of the large gaps, covering it with the palm of his hand. “I think I’m ready for some happier memories together. Aren’t you?”

He closed his eyes, and golden light flared beneath his palm, so bright that Kairi needed to cover her eyes. When the light faded, and Roxas pulled his hand away, the glass beneath him was intact.

“Oh,” Kairi breathed in realization, and let go of the Kingdom Key to scramble for her pack.

The bottle. The struggle gem. The paopu fruit. Wayfinder, necklace, Naminé’s drawing. The raft. One by one, they repaired the broken fragments of Sora’s heart, returning each precious piece they found until all that was left was a large crevice, spreading from Sora’s shoulder to his sleeping eye.

Together, Kairi and Roxas grabbed the Kingdom Key, and placed it over the last missing piece. “It’s time to come home, Sora.” Kairi whispered, “we came for you. Just like I promised.”

They closed their eyes as light burst under their palms, gold and silver, and when Kairi’s eyes fluttered open, she looked down at Sora’s face, peacefully asleep and perfectly whole.

Kairi’s smile was gigantic and watery, and she stood up with Roxas as a Keyhole appeared in the glass, right over Sora’s chest. Grinning, Kairi called her Keyblade to her hand, and after sharing a look with Roxas, the two of them pointed their Keyblades at the Sleeping Keyhole to unlock Sora’s slumbering heart.

The ‘click’ echoed around them, and it was the best sound Kairi had ever heard. “Time to wake up, Sleepyhead.” She said quietly, and Roxas snorted at her side.

High, high above them, there was light – and it was blue, a bright familiar blue, and it rippled and fractured around them like the sea. A shadow drifted overhead, and Kairi looked up with her heart in her throat as a figure floated above them, limp with sleep.

Kairi didn’t know when she moved, but she jumped, arms outstretched as she floated up, up, higher and higher towards the person she’s been aching to see again for so long.

Roxas reached him seconds before she did, and he threw his arms around his neck, pulling him close just as Kairi clutched at the lapels of his jacket, using it to pull herself in the rest of the way. The light increased around them, reminding Kairi of Destiny Islands, when the sun beams into the bright blue waters, and as the light overtook their senses, Kairi pressed her cheek against Sora’s chest, feeling his heart pound against her ear, strong and alive.

Alive.

Alive.
Tears slipped down Kairi’s face, and she let out a quiet sob of relief.

*Thank goodness.*

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Kairi and Roxas have been in the Realm of Sleep for three days.

Riku was trying his hardest not to worry, sitting in the sands of the play islands and watching as the sun slowly set on another day. He was trying not to worry, but it was just too strong a part of him to ignore, so he sat, and he stressed, biting down on his thumb as he stared at the rippling waves.

A large hand, a deeper brown from their days in the sun, landed on his shoulder, and Riku looked up into Terra’s brown eyes. His eyes crinkled in the corners as he smiled, giving his shoulder a comforting squeeze “It’s gonna be fine,” he assured him quietly, “they’ll be back soon.”

Riku sighed and tried to let some of the tension go in his shoulders. “I know,” he murmured, “I’m just – I still worry.”

“I understand.” Straightening back up to his full height, Terra silently took everyone in, which prompted Riku to look around and take stock of everyone, too.

Aqua was currently napping off her time at vigil, head in Ventus’ lap as he too began to doze off, leaning against the trunk of a palm tree. Lea was currently absent, off taking a walk across the play islands to ‘try and get rid of some of the jitters’, as he’d said.

Naminè and Xion were leaning against the log they’d shared with Roxas before he departed for his exam, hands laced together. Xion was asleep against Naminè’s shoulder, but Naminè was wide awake, pressing her cheek against the top of Xion’s head as her eyes stayed glued onto the water.

None of them had left the play islands once Kairi and Roxas vanished beneath the waves, and if they did leave, it was usually for food. No one wanted to miss their return, or spend the days at home, worrying over the fact that they might not come back at all.

Closing his eyes, Riku inhaled deeply, and clung to that shared dream he had with Kairi, where he got to hold her, talk to her, and know that she was well.

*She’s strong,* he reminded himself, *she’s worked hard for this. She’s going to be fine.*

Naminè’s sharp gasp pulled him back to earth, and Riku whipped his head around to see her staring out at the waters, hand over her mouth. Xion had awoken at Naminè’s gasping, and her eyes had widened and focused in on the sea, watching.

Terra had also stiffened to alertness and had begun to turn towards Ventus and Aqua, prepared to wake them up, but Aqua was already rising to her feet, and Ventus’ eyes were open, staring out at the ocean.
Waiting.

Riku’s heart had started to pound in his chest as Lea came into view, sprinting across the sand and skidding to a stop once he reached them, bent over his knees as he caught his breath.

“You felt it, right?” he breathed, “did you feel it?”

Riku’s tongue felt like it was in knots, his words sticking behind his teeth, and he couldn’t say anything, turning to the ocean with everyone else, settling in to wait.

Something in the air had changed.

Five minutes later, Kairi and Roxas washed onto shore.

They were gone one moment and there the next, appearing on the sand in a wash of seafoam. Roxas was on the right, hand curled tightly in fabric, forehead pressed into the curve of his shoulder. Kairi was on the left, cheek pressed against his chest, her hand latched onto the lapel of his jacket, tight, like she was afraid he would vanish under her hands.

Pressed close between them, wrapped up in their arms, was Sora. Deeply, peacefully asleep. Alive.

A lump rose up in Riku’s throat, choking him, and he slowly pushed himself onto his knees, taking in the three bodies that washed up before him. The play islands were deathly silent, everyone barely taking a breath, afraid that any noise would break the spell and they would vanish.

Finally, Riku took in a shaky breath, and raised his voice enough for everyone to hear him

“We welcome our new Keyblade Masters,” he whispered hoarsely, “that have safely completed their tasks, and returned to the Realm of Light.”

He blinked, and tears streaked down his cheeks as he finally allowed himself to smile, his heart the lightest it’s ever felt in months.

“Congratulations to you – Keyblade Masters Kairi and Roxas.”

Behind him Naminè muffled a sob into her hand, and Riku closed his eyes as more tears streamed down his cheeks.

Relieved.

*Thank goodness.*
wiggles happily

the rescuers for world five!!! love that movie, ugh. I don't even have a lot to add in this bottom note, really. I'm just happy. I'm happy we finally made it here. one more chapter left, now. and that's the most bittersweet thing I've ever said.

comments and kudos are loved forever, and I'll see y'all soon! one last time.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

good morniiiiiiing

so, here we are! last chapter. I'm not gonna lie, kinda weepy about it. this fic has been my baby this entire summer, and to see it finished.....damn. I haven't been so happy writing something in an age lmao.

gosh I don't even know what else to say. so I guess I'll let y'all get to it!!

for the last time - enjoy!!

unbeta'd, and everything has been edited by me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After her Mark of Mastery exam, Kairi slept for three and a half days.

She couldn’t wake even if she wanted to, drained in a way that she couldn’t explain; her entire body felt weighed down, like she was made of lead. So Kairi slept – a deep, healing kind of sleep – and didn’t have a single dream.

When she finally woke up, it was slow, groggily taking in the warm breeze brushing over her skin from her open window and the large, warm hand running over her hair. Wrinkling her nose, Kairi finally pried her eyes open and looked up, slowly, into the eyes of her father.

Somehow, she was back home.

Kairi’s stomach dropped into her toes, afraid that it was all a dream – that her exam never happened, and Sora was still gone. Her vision quickly became blurred by a veil of tears, and her distress must have been extremely obvious because her father’s face, which had been unreadable as he stared at her, morphed into a warm smile.

“Dad,” she croaked, “is this – did I –”

“My extraordinary girl,” he said quietly, brushing her bangs away from her forehead. His eyes were slightly glassy with tears, “I don’t know how you did it. But you did it. Where’ve you been these past few days, huh?”

The tears that had filled her eyes spilled over, and Kairi slowly pushed herself upright, huffing and sobbing by the time she leaned into her dad’s arms. She noticed that she was still in her protective clothing, crusted all over with days old seawater, but her father didn’t care, scooping her up and holding her close.

“Dad,” she blubbered into his shoulder, “dad, I –”
“I was wondering what was going on, when you and your sister went off to the play islands and didn’t come back for days.” He said into her hair, “and then Naminè calls me to help bring you in, passed out, and I see Sora, and I just –”

Shaking his head, Keone pulls back and cups Kairi’s face in his hands, eyes roving over her face, and she smiled weakly. “I did it,” she admitted in a whisper, “I found Sora. I brought him home.”

“You did,” he agreed. “And you scared me half to death while doing it.”

Keone sighed shakily, brushing Kairi’s bangs out of her face one last time, eyes still traveling across her face. “Your hair definitely wasn’t this shaggy the last time I saw you.” He mused quietly, and Kairi pressed her lips together, saying nothing.

“Sorry for making you worry,” she finally said, eyes dropping down to her lap as she curled her fingers into his shirt. Keone chuckled, tweaking her nose, “I’m your dad, Kairi; I’ll always worry about you.”

Kairi grumbled against the fingers gently clamping her nose, her dad laughing at the honking noise that came out before letting her go. “Alright – how does a bath and some food sound? I can change your sheets for you while you’re in the bathroom.”

At the mention of food, Kairi’s stomach gurgled audibly, and she blushed furiously as Keone helped her to her feet. “That…would be amazing. Dad, thank you.”

She almost cried when she got into her bath, finally able to thoroughly scrub away the sweat and dried salt that crusted her skin and hair. By the time she made her way downstairs, freshly clean and dressed in a shirt she ‘borrowed’ from Riku and some sleep shorts, her dad had just finished placing a bowl of soup on the table next to a grilled cheese sandwich.

“Where’s Naminè?” Kairi asked as she sat, realizing she hasn’t seen a hint of her anywhere since she woke up. She tore into her sandwich as soon as she’s settled, sighing in happiness around a mouthful of bread and cheese.

“Ah, she’s been away to check on one of your other friends. She’ll probably be back in the evening, but she’ll let me know if that changes.”

Roxas.

Concern twisted Kairi’s stomach slightly, and she hoped that he was doing well, probably feeling as drained as she was from traversing through the Sleeping Worlds. Another thought made her pause – if she and Roxas were out of commission for almost four days….how long would Sora be asleep? When would he wake up?

Would he ever?

“I can hear you worrying,” Keone says, placing a glass of juice next to her plate, “turn it down and eat before your soup gets cold.”

He placed his fingers near her temple and turned his hand like he was turning a knob, lowering the volume. “Everything is going to be fine.” He promised, “so rest until then. Eat, and then get some more sleep. Okay?”
“…Okay.” Kairi smiled, the gesture weak but grateful, and turned back to her food. “Hey, Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

The smile she got in return warmed her from the inside out, and her dad placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “I love you, too. Eat your food, okay?”

The homesickness that sat heavy in her gut slowly dissolved, bit by bit, and Kairi sank further into her seat, content.

-0-

Naminè didn’t return home that night, so Kairi had the entire bed to herself, stretching out under the fresh sheets with a loud sigh.

Kairi wasn’t worried; Naminè had let their dad know, as promised, and Lea had sent her a picture – him in the foreground, throwing up a peace sign at the camera, and in the background of the photo was Naminè, fast asleep, curled into a sleeping Roxas’ chest with Xion at his back, arms wrapped around him.

So Kairi was on her own, with all the bed space, and after a couple hours of fruitless tossing and turning, trying to find the most comfortable spot, she looked out at the stars and finally admitted that she couldn’t get to sleep.

It wasn’t because she wasn’t tired – even after being unconscious for three days straight, she could still feel the tug of exhaustion. She was so ready to sleep, but she just – couldn’t.

The bed was too big. Kairi missed the feel of someone breathing at her back, and after days and days of being alone on so many different worlds, the thought of sleeping on her own was unbearable.

Groaning, Kairi slowly rolled out of bed, resigned, and tied her hair up into a bun, throwing on one of Sora’s jackets before quietly heading downstairs. She slipped on her sandals by the front door, but quickly doubled back to the kitchen to leave a note for her dad to find. Couldn’t sleep, she wrote, went to Riku’s. Everything’s fine, be back in the morning.

After leaving the note on the table where her dad would see it, she grabbed her keys and slipped out into the night.

It was warm out, as always, but there was a breeze giving the air a slight chill, and Kairi took her time walking to Riku’s house, taking in the stars scattered across the sky. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, relishing the salt in the air from the ocean as she stood in the fact that she was home.

She was home.

A tiny smile curved her lips, and then she was moving again, back on the path towards Riku’s, and
she resolutely didn’t look at the way she knew would lead to Sora’s.

When she got to Riku’s house, she saw that the window to his room was open, as usual; the three of them always kept their windows open, so they could hop in and see each other whenever they wanted. Now, though, Kairi felt like her legs were made of lead, and couldn’t bear the thought of trying to make the leap into his room.

So instead, she sat down at his porch and sent him a text. *Riku, she sent, are you awake?*

His reply was instantaneous. *Yes, he said, Are you okay?*

*Yeah, she replied, I just need you to open your front door ’cause I can’t climb to your window right now.*

Riku didn’t respond, but that was alright, because the front door was yanked open a minute later and he was staring down at her with wide eyes.

Kairi grinned at him, rising to her feet, “Riu-kuuu,” she sang quietly, holding her arms out for a hug, “I’m back.” She was quickly swept up into his arms, and she happily shoved her face into his shoulder, muscles already relaxing at his touch.

“I had no idea you were awake,” he said in a trembling whisper, “when did you – are you okay, I should’ve –”

She placed the tips of her fingers over his lips, silencing his worries. “I woke up this afternoon,” she said in a soft whisper, “everything’s – I’m fine, I just –”

Kairi shrugged, sheepish, “I just couldn’t sleep.”

She tried not to sway on her feet too much as Riku took her in, messy hair and all, and his eyes softened, arms tightening around her waist. “Well, you look like you’re about to pass out on my porch, so let’s go inside.”

Riku waited for her as she kicked her sandals off by the door, and then he led her up the stairs into his room, quietly closing the door behind him while Kairi made a beeline for his bed, flopping onto the blankets with a happy sigh.

“*Wow, I missed your bed,*” Kairi hummed happily, shimmying out of her jacket and making her way under the blankets. Riku scoffed, sliding beneath the blankets once Kairi had settled, “*oh, my bed – is that the only thing you missed about me?*”

“Your bed’s the most comfortable out of all of ours,” she said solemnly, “I’m obviously only using you for your bed.” Riku snorted with laughter, and Kairi wiggled close until they were nose to nose, happily enjoying the green flecks in his turquoise eyes.

“I missed a lot of things about you,” she admitted in a whisper, “the exam was horribly lonely. Naminè, she’s still over in Twilight Town with Roxas, and I’ve just – I’ve been alone for so many days.”

Riku’s smile was sympathetic now, understanding, and he gently brushed Kairi’s bangs away from her face. “I understand.”
She knew he would, out of everyone, but hearing it still made her relax more into the bed, relieved. “You did it, though.” He wound his arms back around her waist, pulling her even closer, “how’s it feel, Master Kairi?”

Her cheeks heated up with a blush, and she covered her face, trying to hide from Riku’s snickering. “Stop,” she groaned quietly, “I haven’t even had the time to think about it!!”

Kairi’s heart thrilled at it, though, and she repeated the title again in her head: Master Kairi, she said to herself, Keyblade Master Kairi. It felt like a dream.

“I just can’t believe I did it,” she confessed, breathlessly happy, “I woke up at home and I – I was so afraid none of it happened. But it did. We brought Sora home.”

“You did.” Riku confirmed, “you did amazing. Both of you.”

Kairi soaked up the praise silently, becoming lost in thought as she looked away, her eyes drifting. “…Have you seen him?” She finally asked Riku’s collarbone, twisting her fingers around the hem of his shirt.

Riku knew who she was asking about, because he’d stiffened, his hands tightening a little around her waist. “…No.” He finally answered, “I…it didn’t really feel right. Trying to go see him without you.”

She nodded, understanding, and looked back up into his eyes. “We’ll have to see him eventually,” she said quietly, hoping none of her fear showed on her face. “Soon, I think.”

“Soon.” He agreed, “but right now, we’re going to sleep, okay?”

“Alright. Oh! Wait, I forgot something.”

Riku blinked at her, confused, and Kairi tipped her face up towards him, expectant. It took him a minute, but he laughed silently once he understood, and leaned in to give her a soft kiss goodnight. She hummed happily against his lips, relishing the contact, “I really missed that.” She said quietly, chasing after him a little once he pulled away. “Come back, I want another one.”

“Sleep, we’re going to sleep.” But he was laughing, leaning in to give her one more kiss despite his protesting. “We can kiss a lot more tomorrow, go to sleep.”

“Is that a promise?”

“If it’ll get you to sleep, sure.” He ran a palm down her back, and Kairi melted, leaning into Riku with a gusty sigh. She was finally comfortable, her breathing falling in time with Riku’s, and her eyes slowly started to droop closed. She wanted to talk to Riku a little more, and Kairi tried to speak, but exhaustion finally dragged her down, and her voice slurred, slowed, stopped.

She slept.

-o-
It took her two more days to find the courage to see Sora.

During those two days, Roxas had finally woken up, Kairi getting the news through another picture from Lea – this time of Roxas grinning widely at the camera, determinedly making his way through an impressive stack of waffles.

And it’s not to say that Kairi didn’t try to visit – she knew the way to Sora’s house by heart, could probably walk there blind – but every time she tried to make her way there, she just….froze. She couldn’t find the reason why – maybe she was just afraid to see what’s happened, since they’d washed up from the Sleeping Worlds.

Afraid to see what’s become of him.

But that reasoning didn’t feel right. Kairi couldn’t do it, either way – her last attempts of going on her own over the two days ending in failure.

Until the next day, when Riku showed up on her doorstep in the morning.

“Ah, Riku!” She heard her dad say as he opened the door, “long time no see! What brings you over?”

“He, Keone. I’m here to pick up Kairi,” he explained, “we’re going to see Sora today.”

Kairi stiffened up at the table and Naminè, back from Twilight Town, gave her a long, searching look.

“Oh, that’s great! Let me know how he’s doing, will you? I’ve been worried.”

“Of course.”

“Good, good. Well – come on in! We were having breakfast, so I’m sure Kairi’s heard you.”

“She did,” Naminè called out, “We’re gonna go upstairs really quick so she can get ready.” Grabbing her hand, Naminè tugged her out of her seat and led them up the stairs to their shared room, and Kairi woodenly followed.

“What’s wrong?” Naminè asked once the door closed behind them, “don’t you want to go see Sora? I thought you’d be happy.”

“I am.” At Naminè’s unsure glance, she insisted, “I am. I’m happy that he’s back, it’s just –”

Her words died in her throat – just what? She wasn’t sure. And she was happy that Sora was back home with them, where he belonged – she was. Every time she thought about it, all that she went through to try and bring him home and succeeding, the pride and joy that rises in her almost chokes her. She was happy.

But.

“I don’t know,” she finally admitted in a whisper, “I’m just really confused. I’m feeling so much, I-” She twists her fingers together nervously, and looks up into Naminè’s sympathetic eyes.
“…I get it.” She finally said, reaching out to pry Kairi’s anxious fingers apart, holding them tightly. “It’s a lot. But Kairi, you should go see him. How you’re feeling will make sense to you eventually, okay?”

Kairi nodded, hesitant, and Naminè squeezed her hands before letting them go. “Okay. Go get dressed, quickly. Go see him.”

So she did. She picked out some clothes. She showered. She made her way downstairs.

Riku was in the kitchen with her dad, waiting for her, and he smiled at her, understanding.

“Kairi.” She turned to face her dad, and he smiled at her, leaning in to press a kiss to her forehead. “You’re worrying too loudly again.” Once more, he turned the imaginary knob at her temple, lowering the volume, “go see Sora. Check on how he’s doing. It’ll be okay.”

Pressing her lips together, she nodded, giving him a tiny smile, and with that they were out the door. Once the front door closed behind them, Kairi took Riku’s offered hand as they stepped off her porch.

The walk to Sora’s house was quiet, and Kairi clutched at Riku’s hand the entire time.

Aouli looked surprised to see them when he opened the door; he looked a little unkempt, like he hasn’t slept for a while, and his blue eyes were rimmed with red. “Kairi! Riku! What a nice surprise, it’s good to see you. Are – are you here to see -?”

“Yes.” Riku nodded, “I’m sorry it took us so long to stop by. We would’ve brought something, but –”

“No, no! Come in, please.”

Aouli moved to the side, giving them space to enter, and as they kicked off their shoes, he closed the door. “Really, you don’t need to bring anything,” he continued, “gifts feel like overkill at this point. You –”

His voice broke, and he coughed a little, blinking rapidly. “You – my son. You brought me back my son.” Aouli shook his head, “never – nothing could ever –”

A tear slipped down his cheek, and he swiped it away, laughing wetly. “Riku, Kairi – I don’t know how you did it, but thank you. Thank you.”

Kairi felt frozen, a lump rising in her throat, choking her, and at her side, Riku inhaled, shaky. “I – of course.” Riku finally said, “Aouli, of course. We –”

“We love him too much to just – let him go,” Kairi finally said, her voice faint. “We were the only ones who could reach him. So we did. We had to.”

She couldn’t bear to stand there anymore and watch Aouli cry, so Kairi let Riku go and stepped forward, wrapping her arms around his middle, squeezing him tight. Sighing, still shaken, Aouli squeezes her back and presses his cheek to the top of her head, grateful.
“Alright,” Aouli finally said, wiping at his eyes as he stepped back, “go on upstairs – he’s in his room.”

They made their way up the stairs, and by the time they reached Sora’s room, Riku’s hand had found hers once again, and Kairi was holding onto him like he was the only thing keeping her from running back down the stairs and out the house.

The door to Sora’s room was open, now, and the room was filled with sunlight in a way it hadn’t been for months. The windows were open, warm, fragrant air from outside taking over the staleness that had covered the room, and there, lying in his bed – Sora.

Still asleep.

Kairi’s stomach dropped, but she couldn’t look away from him – wouldn’t look away from him, eyes locked on his face, taking in his fluttering eyelashes as he dreamed.

“Kairi. Riku.”

Jun was there, sitting on the bed near one of Sora’s limp hands, looking up at them with wide brown eyes. Nalani was curled up in the cradle of her arm, fast asleep, her mother’s shirt caught tight in her small fist.

“I figured you two would come visit sooner,” Jun finally said, eyes pulling back to Sora, magnetized. “I’m sorry,” Kairi said, “it was my fault. I was kinda – unconscious. For a few days.”

Jun turned back to her, eyes searching, and Kairi squeezed Riku’s hand, nervous. “I said I’d tell you,” she said steadily, “and I meant it. But I can’t – I can’t do it without him.” Jun’s eyes darted between the two of them, thoughtful, and then she nodded slightly, turning back to her son.

Gentle, she brushed his bangs away from his face with her free hand. “I thought it was a dream, when Riku brought him to me.” She finally said, “that I would wake up because my alarm went off, or Nalani started to fuss, and that none of it was real.”

She ran a thumb over Sora’s bisected eyebrow, tracing over a scar he got from a fall off the docks when he was five. “I still fear that now,” she continued, “that I’ll come in here one day, and it’ll be like he was never here at all.

Every day I sit here, and check on him, and it’s the same thing, always – just. Him, here, asleep. Always asleep.”

Her eyes were scared, questioning as she looked back over to them, “do you think he’s going to wake up? Will he ever?”

Kairi didn’t know what to say in the face of the one fear that twisted her up inside, and when she tried to open her mouth, to say something, the words just stuck in her throat.

“Of course he will.”

Riku’s words pulled her back to earth, and he glanced between the two of them, lips curled in a reassuring smile. “Sora just needs the rest,” he explained, “when he’s ready, he’ll wake up.”
Once he’s recovered. Riku didn’t say the words, but Kairi heard them clear enough, and a knot loosened up in her chest. Jun said nothing, eyes back on Sora as she cupped his face running a thumb over his cheek, but some of the tension left her shoulders. “I know Aouli has probably said this already,” she said softly, “but I want you to hear this from my own mouth, as well. Kairi. Riku –”

Jun smiled at them, tears slipping down her cheeks, “thank you,” she stressed, full of feeling. “Thank you for bringing my son back to me.”

In her arms, Nalani began to squirm, fussing as sputtered cries slipped past her lips. “Ohh, we’re getting upset, huh?” Jun cooed, wiping her own tears away before rising to her feet, “it’s probably time to eat, isn’t it? You two, take your time seeing him, I – we’ll be downstairs.”

Placing a hand on their arms as she passed, Jun slipped out the door and down the stairs, heading to the kitchen before Nalani’s fussing turned into full blown wails.

As soon as they were alone, Riku’s breath left him in a huge gust, and Kairi sagged against the doorframe, pressing her free hand over her racing heart. “This is –” her voice cracked, and Kairi cleared her throat, “this is, uh…this was really –”

“Yes,” Riku agreed, “it was a – I didn’t expect this to be….a lot.”

And it was a lot, this weight of gratitude more than they were ever ready to bear. Slowly, they made their way to Sora’s bed, and Riku occupied the spot where Jun previously sat while Kairi made a space for herself among the pillows, Sora’s head resting by her hip.

They stared at him, quiet, taking him in after almost a year of absence; his hair was a little longer, now, and some of the roundness in his cheeks disappeared. Kairi started to reach out, to brush his hair away from his face to see him better, but her hand froze halfway, afraid to touch.

Riku had no such hesitations, and he scooped up Sora’s limp hand between his, holding it to his cheek. Kairi’s face screwed up, trying not to cry, and she pulled her hand back to her chest, clutching at her shirt. “I can’t believe he’s here,” she admitted, her voice squeaking with suppressed tears. “I’m looking right at him and I still can’t believe it.”

“I know.” Riku sighed deeply, pressing a kiss to the back of Sora’s hand, and looked over at Kairi with glassy eyes.

“I –” she bit her lip, “I don’t even know what I’m going to say to him. When he wakes up.” Kairi laughed quietly, feeling shaky, “just the thought of – of being able to really talk to him is just –”

Her voice failed her, and she shook her head, pressing her lips together.

“It feels like a lot,” Riku agreed. “When it’s not through – through dreams, or anything like that. We didn’t lose him – we brought him back. All this –” His voice faltered a little, and he cleared his throat, blinking rapidly. “All this pain,” he finally said, “it feels like – I dunno, not that it had a purpose, but – I can’t really explain it.”

Kairi looked down at Sora’s peaceful face, mulling over Riku’s words, “…I think I get it.” She finally said, “what you’re trying to say. I understand.”
Between them, Sora sighed quietly in his sleep, and Kairi’s palms itched, she wanted to touch him so badly. But her hands stayed tangled in her shirt as something held her back.

The two of them fell silent, watching over his slumber until Jun called them down for lunch.

-o-

A week after returning from the Sleeping Worlds, Sora finally woke up.

Kairi didn’t know this right away – there wasn’t a change in the air, signifying that something big happened. She didn’t receive any messages about Sora’s awakening, and so she went about her usual routine since she’s woken up.

She eats. She sleeps, often. She takes walks around the island to slowly regain her strength, drained from the exam. She’d tried to summon her Keyblade, once, and practice her stances at the play islands, and she slept for the rest of the day after that attempt.

So Kairi tries her best to take it easy, for now, and sticks to walking along the beach – sometimes with a friend, but usually on her own. It was nice to enjoy a little peace, to take in the hum of the waves in time with the cries of birds, and the bright dots of ships across the water. She soaks in the sun and fluffy white clouds, the warm breeze ruffling her hair, and she feels her strength come back to her, bit by bit.

It’s during one of these walks that she sees him, a little ways down the beach, and it makes her jerk to a halt.

He was standing in the surf, looking out at the sea with an unreadable expression while the water lapped at his bare feet, shoes discarded in the sand. He wasn’t in his charmed clothing anymore, instead in a simple tank top and shorts, and even though he still looked a little tired, he looked – good. Healthy.

Alive.

Something caught his attention, and Sora looked down, his face brightening up with a smile as he stared at Nalani, perched on his hip, safe in the crook of his arm. She reached up with a pudgy hand, batting at his chin, and Sora laughed, grabbing her tiny fingers and pressing them to his lips, miming eating them until she screamed and sputtered with laughter.

Hitching her up on his hip, Sora laughed as Nalani began to gnaw on her fist, rubbing her face against his shoulder in that clumsy, earnest way that babies do, and his smile softened as he hid his face in her soft fluff of brown hair, holding his sister close.

Kairi felt frozen, legs rooted into the sand, and a tangled knot of feelings roiled up in her gut.

She could talk to him, right now. She could go over there and speak to him, and touch him, and resolve a violently aching longing that’s hounded her steps for months.
But she can’t. She can’t.

I’m not ready, a part of her cried out. I’m not ready!!

In stiff, jerky movements, Kairi turned on her heel and started to walk back the way she came. She prays that Sora doesn’t see her, doesn’t try to chase her – prays that the prickling at her back is just her being paranoid.

Kairi slowly makes her way back home, calling out a tired greeting and sighing heavily once she made it to her room, dropping onto her bed. Blindly fumbling for her nightstand, she picked up her gummiphone, rolling onto her back as she stared at her lockscreen, considering.

Just because she was avoiding him doesn’t mean that everyone else had to be left in the dark.

With that, she opened her phone and sent out a mass message, two simple words before dropping her gummiphone at her side.

He’s awake.

-o-

Even though it was a rather expansive place, at the end of the day, Destiny Islands was still a pretty small town, and Kairi couldn’t avoid Sora forever.

The doesn’t mean she doesn’t try.

For about three weeks she was able to avoid seeing him, and she tried to use that time to figure out why she was so reluctant at the thought of seeing him in the first place. Kairi’s tried so many times to try and see him – walking around their usual hang out spots in the main islands, heading to his home – but always, halfway through the trip, she just…freezes.

The conflicting jumble of feelings in her belly have increased, and the longer she drags this out and avoids him, the worse she feels.

“Is it like that time a few months ago?” Naminè asked her one day, “when Riku left for a while?”

Kairi licked at her ice cream, considering it, swinging her legs as she thought. “…Maybe.” She finally said, “I think so. I dunno.”

She had finally recovered enough to return to her Keyblade training a couple weeks ago, and she was now at the play islands, sitting on her usual paopu tree enjoying the sea salt ice cream that Roxas brought for them.

“She’s got to go see him.” Roxas, already done with his ice cream, peeked around Naminè to speak to her, placing his chin on her shoulder. “I promise it’ll feel a lot better when you talk to him. And he misses you.”

“I know.” She mumbles into her ice cream – and she does, she knows Roxas has a point, that it
would feel better to just talk to him. Roxas barely waited a week before coming to the islands to see Sora, and Kairi had run into Sora again on her usual walk along the beach just in time to see Roxas burst from a corridor of shadows, wide eyed.

Kairi watched Roxas and Sora stare at each other for a moment, and slowly began to back away, not wanting to intrude. But then Roxas’ face screwed up, and he was running, kicking sand up behind him as he slammed into Sora, almost sending both of them tumbling into the sand as he threw his arms around his neck.

“You’re so damn stupid!!” She heard Roxas yell, his voice breaking, echoing across the beach, and Sora’s shoulders shook as he wrapped his arms around Roxas, squeezing him back tightly.

She was still far enough that they wouldn’t notice her, so Kairi quickly went back the way she came, not wanting to intrude on their reunion as much as she already has.

“Hey, don’t let your ice cream melt.” She was pulled out of her thoughts by Naminè’s gentle nudge against her side. Kairi halfheartedly licked at the melting treat, and Naminè and Roxas looked at her with searching eyes.

“You’ll see him when it’s time,” Naminè finally said, finishing off the last of her ice cream. “It’ll be alright, Kairi.”

“Yeah, just don’t throw a fireball at him like you did to Riku.” Roxas said, teasing, and Kairi scoffed. “I make no promises,” she says, haughtily putting her nose in the hair, and her heart warmed as her friends laughed.

She felt a little better, heading home, hugging Roxas goodbye and departing with Naminè in one of the rowboats back to the main islands. Kairi promised Riku she would stop by and see him after, so once she got home, she quickly showered off the sand and sweat sticking to her skin and skipped out the door once she told her dad where she was going.

The sun was starting to set as she made her way to Riku’s house, and Kairi enjoyed the changing colors, the soft pinks and golds of sunset. Hopping up the steps, Kairi knocked on the front door and rocked back onto her heels, waiting, grinning once Minato opened the door.

“Kairi!” She exclaimed, smiling, “what a surprise! You’re looking a lot better, how are you?”

“Hi, mom!” Kairi chirped, entering the house once Minato stepped aside, “I’m doing a lot better now, thanks for asking!” Kicking off her shoes, she swept Minato up into a quick hug, “I told Riku I’d come see him today – is he here?”

“Oh, yes; he’s up in his room. He hasn’t been there long, he only just got home a little before you arrived.”

Kairi’s eyebrow ticked up a little at that, curious. “Alright, then.” She said thoughtfully, “I’ll just head up to see him now.”

“Will you be sticking around for dinner? Nanami and I are about to get started making something now.”
From the kitchen, Nanami’s voice piped in, “oh, Mina, is Kairi here? Hello, Kairi!”

“Hi, mama! No, I probably won’t stay for dinner this time. Thank you, though! Maybe next time.”

Slipping up the stairs, Kairi made her way to Riku’s room, knocking on the door to alert her presence before entering his room. He looked up at her when she closed the door, and her stomach dropped with concern when she saw him. Riku’s eyes were red, face blotchy crimson, and he looked like he’d been doing an equal measure of crying and kissing.

Kairi stared hard at him, leaning against his closed door. “You saw him,” she stated, eyes narrowed, and she felt a stab of guilt at how accusing her tone came out.

Riku wasn’t fazed by her tone, however, and just blinked at her, slowly. “I did,” he finally said, his voice hoarse, “I was… I was coming back from the shops, ‘cause my moms needed stuff for dinner. And I just –” His voice broke a little, and he coughed, clearing his throat, “I – I saw him.”

Kairi continued to stare at him, saying nothing, so Riku continued to talk, babbling, “I didn’t… know what to say to him, at first. He helped me with shopping. We walked around for a little while. And I didn’t…I just –”

He shrugged sheepishly, “it all just kinda burst out of me. I might have yelled at him a little.”

“Oh, ‘a little’,” Kairi finally said, sarcastic, and Riku sputtered out a laugh, placing a bashful hand over his face.

“It might have been more than a little,” he admitted, his hand dropping down to his lap, “but… things are alright now. I’ve missed him so much, Kairi. You know? I’ve missed him. And now he’s here.” He sounded so amazed, saying that – like he still couldn’t believe it was true, and Kairi could sympathize with that feeling.

“He told me he hasn’t seen you, yet.” Kairi stiffened, and Riku picked his head up to look at her, his eyes so sad. “What’s wrong, Kairi? He misses you, you know that.”

This is the second time today that she had to hear that, and she couldn’t help the annoyance that rose up in her chest. “I didn’t come over to get a lecture from you,” she ground out, trying not to snap at him, “I’m tired of people asking me why I haven’t seen him yet!!! I don’t have to see him if I don’t want to!! I’m not ready, I -!!”

“Kairi.”

Riku’s voice was soft, and he held a hand out to her, silently asking her to come over to him. Closing her eyes, Kairi took a deep breath, trying to calm down the ire that swelled up in her, and after a few more breaths she slowly walked up to him, taking his hand and letting him pull her in. With gentle tugs, Riku pulled her close until she was standing between his legs, and he looked up at her, concerned.

“What’s wrong, Kairi?” He asked again, wrapping his arms around her and lacing his fingers at her back. Her shoulders drooped, and Kairi sagged into him, leaning in until her forehead rest against his.

“I really miss him,” she confessed in a whisper, “and I want to see him so badly – I do. But every
time I get a chance, or — or try to go see him, I just —”

She sighed, and Riku let her go long enough to rub a comforting hand down her arm until she could gather her words.

“I just feel — a lot, about everything. Now that — now that we brought him back, it’s like everything I’ve just kinda…put to the side is just…” She shrugged, unable to properly explain it.

Every time she’s seen Sora, emotions from the past year rose up in her like bile, and all the things she’s wanted to say to him get lodged in her throat, the words sticking behind her teeth, and she just — she freezes up.

Riku doesn’t say anything, but Kairi knows that he gets it, that he understands what she’s feeling — she can see it in his eyes. “I’m not going to push you to see him,” he finally said, “but don’t take too long.”

He smiled, “you know that we’re absolutely hopeless without you.”

Kairi felt like crying, and she plopped herself down on Riku’s knee, letting him pull her into a hug. “I’m sorry I’m being stupid.” She mumbled into his shoulder, and he shook his head, holding her closer.

“It’s not stupid,” he promised, “we’ve had kind of a rough year.”

“That feels like the biggest understatement ever.”

Riku laughed softly in her ear, giving her a squeeze. “Are you going to be sticking around to eat with us?”

“Your moms already asked. I’m going to eat at home this time. Being gone for the exam, and then after…it shook my dad up a little.”

“I understand that. Next time, then. Want me to walk you home?” He set Kairi back onto her feet before pushing off the bed, tucking a lock of hair behind is ear.

“Yeah.” She said, lost in thought. Kairi followed Riku downstairs, waving goodbye to his mothers as he told them he was walking her back to her house. As they walked, Kairi reached out and grabbed his hand, lacing their fingers together.

“Thanks, Riku,” she said softly, and he must have known she didn’t mean for walking her home, because he smiled, running a thumb across the back of her hand.

“Of course, Kairi. Don’t worry about it too much, alright?”

-o-

Turns out, Kairi should have worried about it too much. She wasn’t worrying about it enough, even.
Because she thought she would have a little more time; Kairi thought that she would be able to get the time to get her shit together and find the words she wanted so that she could finally talk to Sora.

But she forgot that Sora was one of the most impatient people in all the worlds, and after almost a month of radio silence on her end, of course he was going to come to her. Of course he was going to chase her all over the islands until he found her.

She should have known better.

“Kairi!!”

Kairi felt every muscle in her body lock up when Sora’s voice hit her ears, and she whirled around in disbelief, eyes wide. His chest was heaving, and he looked winded, like he’d run around the entire island, trying to find her, bent over his knees as he tried to catch his breath. When he finally straightened up, he looked at her like she was the best thing he’d ever seen, and Kairi’s toes curled into the sand, her muscles tense as she floundered over whether she should just leave her bag and shoes behind and run.

She wanted to; she wanted to sprint away from the beach until she was back home and hide until she could swallow down all the words, all the feelings, until she could untangle them and make sense of it all.

Her desire to flee must have started to become obvious, because Sora’s expression went from awed to desperate, and he practically tripped over his feet to get to her. “Please don’t walk away from me!” He begged, rushed, “Kairi, don’t go –”

He was a lot faster than she expected, and she stumbled backwards, unprepared for the lightning that jolted up her arm when his hand grabbed hers. I’m not ready!! that terrified part of her still screamed, over and over - but slowly, slowly, it quieted down more and more, as Kairi gradually realized that Sora was touching her.

He was touching her. His hand was warm, and a little sweaty from all the running he’d done, and his grip was strong. Desperate.

Sora was touching her, and he was still here.

He started to babble nervously, readjusting his hold on her hand, “I – Riku said I should give you some space but I, I mi – I really, really missed you, and I haven’t seen you since – since, y’know, and –”

Kairi wasn’t really listening, her eyes darting between his face and his hand, still wrapped around hers. He was still touching her. He was still here. Bit by bit, her muscles slowly relaxed, and Kairi took the smallest step closer, wondering.

Sora didn’t notice, still speaking in a rush, and his brow wrinkled with anxiety the longer she was silent, “– and I just, I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and stuff, so I –”

She placed her free hand on his chest, right over his heart, and Sora immediately fell silent.
Kairi stepped a little closer, and they were almost chest to chest at this point, but she barely noticed, enraptured by the rapid, nervous beating of Sora’s heart against her hand. It pounded away in his chest, and it was strong, so much stronger than the weak flutter from before that haunted her for days.

She took in how close they were, the heat coming off his skin, and she finally picked up her head to look at him, really look at him. His eyes were as blue as she remembered, and still so pretty, even when they were confused; that horrible pale pallor was gone from his skin, and he looked as healthy as ever, his skin back to its usual warm, healthy brown tones.

His heart beat away in his chest, and his light was as bright as ever, shining stronger than before. I’m alive, everything about him promised. I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m here.

Her hand was still wrapped up in his. He hasn’t faded away.

He was really, truly here.

“…Kairi?” Sora finally said, his voice small, “are you mad at me?”

Kairi grabbed a fistful of the tank top he was wearing and roughly pulled his face down to hers.

The kiss was rough, biting – clumsy, after so much time apart, and Sora trilled against her lips happily because, wow, he couldn’t kiss Kairi for months and months, and this was wonderful. His hands had hovered over her back, unsure, but now they slowly closed in, intent on keeping her close to him after so long apart, after all the time he spent chasing after her.

But before he could properly hold her close, Kairi placed her hands on his chest and shoved him with all her strength, sending him tumbling into the sea with a shout.

Sputtering, Sora quickly sat up, shoving his soaking hair out of his face with one hand. “Kairi,” he whined, laughing, “that was mean – how could you –”

He looked up, grinning, but his smile quickly died when he saw the tears in her eyes.

“Oh, no. Kai –”

“How could you just –” She clenched her teeth, the words sticking in her throat, and she tried, she tried to swallow them down, but she couldn’t hold them back. Naminè was right - Kairi was angry. She was pissed, and the feelings from the past year, the whole tangled mess rose up in her -anger at being left behind over and over, loneliness, blame - bubbling up and over out of the deep well of her grief. “How could you just leave us like that?? How –”

“Kairi, I had to. I had to, I couldn’t just leave you, not after what – what Xehanort did, I had to bring you back, I –”

“Well you shouldn’t have!!” She cut him off, her voice shrill, “you shouldn’t have, if the cost of it was your life!! I had to – I spent months, having to look your parents in the eye as they grieved, and I – I –”
She didn’t know when she started crying in earnest, but tears poured down her face, boiling, as she curled in on herself, sticky, poisonous guilt rising in her like tar, choking her. Kairi was back to those early days after the war, where Sora’s loss was fresh and unbearable. It should have been me, that foul, guilty part of her howled. It should have been me, how could you, how could you, it was my fault, all my fault, I wasn’t worth it, I was never worth it –

“Kairi.”

Damp arms wrapped around her hips as Sora pressed his face into her stomach, holding her close. “You are worth it.” He said firmly, and she wondered when she started to say those words aloud. “You are always worth it. Kairi –”

Sora looked up at her, his chin digging lightly into her belly, and tears clung to his lashes. “Kairi, you’re my best friend,” he said thickly, “I love you. Of course I was going to bring you back, are you kidding me? I won’t hesitate – I’ll do it all again, bring you back a million times, if it meant you got to live.”

He was serious as the grave, and Kairi wanted to scream, wanted to push him back into the water. Instead, she curled her fingers into his wet hair, giving the strands a gentle tug, “I don’t want that,” she reprimanded, “Sora, you have so many people here that love you. You, you can’t just – throw yourself away like that. Not ever again.”

Her jaw trembled, and more tears slipped down her cheeks. “I can’t bear it,” she said in a thin whisper, “my heart can’t go through this. Not again.”

Sora opened his mouth, starting to say something, but a fierce look from Kairi made him fall silent. “I remember that dumbass thing you said, about how you’re nothing without us. Sora, you – you can’t just throw yourself away like that. Not ever again. We – we need you here. I need you here. Riku and I were a mess without you. Your parents were heartbroken.”

He looked devastated at that, and Kairi gently tugged his hair again, hoping the message came through. “Never, ever again,” she stressed, “if – if we fight on, we fight as, as a team. No – no more throwing yourself at things until your heart gives out. No more. Do you promise?”

“But, I –” Sora pressed his forehead into her stomach, hiding his face, “I promised – I promised I’d keep you safe.”

“And I promised that I would keep you safe. So do you really think I’m going to let this go on? We’re a team, Sora. You, me, and Riku. Like always. You don’t have to do everything on your own all the time.”

Kairi sniffled, tears still streaming down her face, “I missed you.” She said, her voice small, “I still miss you, even right now. I feel like you’re going to disappear again any second now.”

“I won’t.” He swore, shaking his head, “I’ll – Kairi, I promise. I won’t ever do that to you again. I promised Riku that, too, and I mean it, I swear. I’m staying. I’m staying.”

He repeated the promise again, so earnest, and Kairi felt the last bit of resistance in her melt away, her knees giving out as she sank down onto the sand, grabbing Sora’s shirt again and pulling his
mouth to hers.

This kiss felt more like an apology, like relief, and Sora sighed happily at the contact, tangling his fingers into her shirt at the small of her back and pulling her in even closer.

“I’m still upset.” She mumbled against his lips, and Sora hummed, still very much wanting to kiss her instead of talk. “You have a lot to make up for. You’re lucky I didn’t throw a fireball at you like I did at Riku.”

“You did what??” Sora exclaimed, pulling back in awe, and actually, Kairi didn’t like that at all, and would very much rather get back to kissing. “Kairi, you threw a fireball at him?? How’d you do that? Did you use your Keyblade? Did you –”

“I am a Keyblade Master,” Kairi sniffed. “I can do loads of cool stuff now.”

Sora’s eyes sparkled, and Kairi could almost see the hundreds of questions building up behind his lips, and she made quick work to stop the flow before it started, pulling him back in for another kiss.

Kairi felt like she was about to burst with the amount of happiness that filled her, with the relief that sank deep into her bones, and she wondered if Sora could feel it, too. He was here – he was here, and he would stay, and he would never disappear under her hands again, never fade away like a ghost in the rays of sunset. She could feel his heart, beating against her own, and it was strong. And he was alive.

She couldn’t stop the giddy curl of her lips even if she tried.

-o-

Kairi and Riku invited everyone to the islands a few days later, to have a small get together now that Sora was back with them. Kairi and Naminè made their way to the play islands around noon, where Sora and Riku were waiting for them, and when Sora saw Naminè his face brightened up, and he ran up to meet them, quickly scooping Naminè up into a hug.

She yelped, not expecting the embrace, but it quickly turned to laughter as Sora spun around, twirling her. “Naminè!!” Sora said happily, “I can finally tell you, after all this time! Naminè – thank you!!”

When he released her, Naminè’s face was blotchy, and her eyes shone with tears. “Sora,” she laughed, swiping away the few tears that escaped, “I’m so, so happy to see you again.”

They placed their bags and towels on the sand, and Kairi brought the snacks she bought over to the small table Riku had set up, shoving ice cream bars and bottles of juice into the bowl of ice provided. Naminè had sat down on her towel, her hat swaying in the sea breeze, and Sora had sat next to her, hands gesturing wildly as he talked.

“Roxas is bringing more food, right?” Riku checked in, and Kairi nodded, “yeah, he should be here soon.”
And as promised, a familiar portal formed a few feet away, and Roxas appeared with Xion in tow, Lea and Isa not far behind. He was holding a familiar cake box in his hands from Twilight Town’s bistro, and he grinned as Sora hopped to his feet at their arrival.

Xion gasped loudly when she saw him, and she darted over, grabbing his hands. “I’m so glad you’re back!!” she cried out, squeezing his hands, “so glad!! Don’t do that anymore, okay?”

“I won’t,” he promised, “I’ll be right here.”

“You better be,” Roxas said as he passed by, quickly heading to the table to deposit his treat so he could wrap Sora up in a hug. “I can’t believe it!” Lea exclaimed, swooping in to ruffle Sora’s hair, “I was shocked when I got that message from Kairi, but look at that! You’re good as new!!”

“Lea,” Sora complained, laughing as he shoved his hand away, “cut it out!!”

“Don’t harm the boy, Lea, he just got back.” Isa said quietly, smiling slightly as he passed by, a bag of food hanging over his arm. “It is good to see you well, Sora,” he continued. “The last I’d heard of your condition was…grim. I’m glad you beat the odds.”

He smiled again, and then went over to the table, unpacking some sandwiches and depositing a few bars of sea salt ice cream into the ice bowl.

Food dropped off, the newcomers began to lay out their own towels, unpacking bags and slathering sunscreen on their faces. It was an hour into their small gathering when a gummi ship touched down within the trees surrounding the play islands, and Naminè was out at sea with Xion and Roxas, the three of them laughing as they fell into a splash fight. Isa and Lea were tossing a frisbee back and forth with Riku, and Kairi was sitting on her towel, leaning against Sora as they cheered Riku on.

“Sorry we’re late!!” They heard Aqua call out, “Ven wanted to pilot the ship, and we had to make a couple of stops.”

“Sora!!”

Sora had jumped to his feet at the voices that burst across the beach, and he immediately started to cry as Donald and Goofy ran to him at a full sprint, sandwiching him between them as they hugged him with all their strength.

“We were so worried!!” Goofy blubbered, placing a large hand over Sora’s head.

“Don’t you ever do something like that again!!” Donald shrilly demanded, furiously checking over him to make sure he was alright.

“I won’t, I promise,” Sora wailed. “Donald, Goofy, I missed you!! I’m sorry!!”

It took a minute for the three of them to calm down, and as they parted, sniffling, Terra, Aqua, and Ventus appeared, small bags of their own thrown over their arms, King Mickey bringing up the rear.

“Gosh, Sora!” King Mickey said as Ventus wrapped Sora up into a hug, “I’m sure glad to see you back with us!”
“Thanks, Your Majesty,” he sniffled, squeezing Ven tight, “I’m happy to be back, too. I’m – I’m so happy.”

Sora’s smile was a little watery, but he glowed with happiness as he looked around at everyone, cheek smooshed up against Ven’s, and Kairi felt the familiar prickle of tears at her eyes.

She didn’t mind it all that much, this time, since they were tears of happiness.

This was how it was supposed to be, she thought as she rose to her feet, making her way into the water. This was how it should’ve happened, that day.

It should have been all of them, celebrating, just like this – finally able to relax and have fun after so much pain, so much fighting. Kairi took in the sounds of joy that surrounded her, of reunions and celebration, and she smiled, truly at peace for the first time in days.

Better late than never, she supposed.

-o-

The large bonfire they set up threw golden sparks up into the night sky and bathed their part of the beach with a warm, golden glow.

The sky was resplendent with stars, and Naminè leaned into Roxas and Xion, smooshed between them as she traced out constellations she’s learned for them with her fingers. Lea and Isa were sitting closer by the fire, making sure to keep an eye on the trio as they quietly talked, Isa nursing a glass of paopu wine Lea got for him.

Aqua was sitting by the fire as well, talking to King Mickey with a tired, content smile, and on her opposite side, Terra was handing Ventus a couple of freshly made s’mores.

Closer by the shore, Donald whooped loudly, swearing to Goofy that he just saw a shooting star, and that they had to make a wish, and Kairi took in the noise and chatter happily, dreamily, as she slipped into a light doze.

It was just like she’d dreamed, months and months ago – her, sandwiched between Sora and Riku, though the three of them were lying on their towels instead of a bed, overlapped to make enough space for them. She was curled up in the middle, like always, and between that and the reaching heat of the bonfire, she was plenty warm.

Riku was at her back, arm draped over the curve of her waist, and Sora was at her front, and she could feel his hand curved around her ribs, thumb gently brushing back and forth.

They spoke in soft murmurs, and even though she was so close, she couldn’t hear what they were saying – but that was fine, with her cheek pressed to Sora’s chest, their words drowned out by the content beating of his heart.

There was a lot left to do, still; they needed to clean up after their long party, needed to stomp out
the fires and say their warm goodbyes as everyone went their separate ways. They needed to talk to Sora, to ask him what he thinks about telling their parents everything – *everything* - so that they no longer had to worry whenever they disappeared.

Even now, content and drowsy as she was, Kairi could hear Yen Sid’s words echo in her mind, about how the Realm of Light wasn’t done with the Keyblade wielders yet, and that there was still much in store for them. That they would need to prepare.

So much left for them to do.

Riku’s arm tightened around her waist and Sora laughed, a rumble in his chest, as Kairi felt him press a kiss into her forehead. She relaxed further into her boys, a small, sleepy smile curving her lips, and she cast those worries away for now.

One thing at a time – no matter what the future held for them, Kairi wasn't afraid. If this year taught her anything, it was that she had the strength to bear it and push through, and that she can - and *will* - fight with all she had for the future she sought.

For now, she was exactly where she wanted to be. Exactly where she was meant to be.

Completely at peace for the first time in months, Kairi leaned into her boys’ arms, and she slept.

**Chapter End Notes**

**DONE. WOW.** wow okay. emotion. a little shorter than I expected, but I'm so content.

I started this whole thing 'cause, as mentioned in chapter one, I thought kh3 sucked! it bummed me out so bad! and one of the top five things that pissed me off the most about it was what happened to kairi. and I just wanted SOMETHING where she gets to rise up in the full potential that I know has been there since I was 12. where she gets to try and struggle and SUCCEED.

so you gotta be the change you wanna see in the world I guess.

like with how the shit ended, it only makes sense for kairi to get a chance to bring sora back. so no matter what happens when the dlcs and final mixes and kingdom hearts fragmentary passage 3.9 comes out, this will be here. something that I *WOULD* like to happen in the games but probably won't. this small bit of wish fulfillment lmao.

guys - thank you. thank you for reading, for commenting, for all the kudos. I've never had so much fun writing something and it's all because of the interactions I had with you!! you all made me work my hardest to get to the end, 'cause I want kh fans now and later to have this little something to enjoy.

so yeah! it's officially a wrap. and right on time too since I start school in literally four days lmao. if you wanna stay in touch, I'm spacebeyonce on tumblr. and maybe I'll be back with some more kh fics when I get some more free time again lmao.

thank you, everyone. bye for now!!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!