Vanitas wasn't supposed to be alive. He was SUPPOSED to have merged with Ventus after his defeat in the Keyblade Graveyard, yet here he was, and now he has a stowaway. Whatever had happened to Sora that he would need to bind his heart to Vanitas' was not his problem, but if he wanted to get his brother out of his heart so he could have some peace and quiet for once, then his best shot was with the Guardians of Light. They might not be too happy to see Vanitas still alive and kicking, but they would help him evict Sora from his heart, whether they wanted to or not.

Sora had opened his heart to protect so many people. Now it was time that someone finally paid him back.
OK, we're finally starting this rollercoaster of a ride. I hate it when you find a really good story that's long but then it peters out halfway through, so you'll be glad to hear that this story is already written as far as chapter 3 with a road map right up until chapter 11! Except a chapter around once a week, all feedback is appreciated, and remember that Vanitas is best boy
Vanitas had no idea how long he’d spent wandering the Realm of Darkness, but it must have been an eternity.

He should’ve known better to think he would get off lightly after he was overpowered at the Keyblade Graveyard. He would stress that it was a very narrow defeat and he would’ve won with both hands tied behind his back if it wasn’t for Terra-Xehanort monologuing about his feelings every five minutes. Vanitas’ opinion of Xehanort and his flunkies had never changed – they were all insane megalomaniacs with one brain cell between them, but the old man had what he needed. The raven Keyblade wielder's darkness would never be extinguished as long as the light that cast the shadow still burned, and Ventus was allied with the Guardians of Light. His best chance at slaying his brother was with the Seekers of Darkness, and if it meant subjecting himself to the whim of Xehanort and his eleven clones then so be it. Vanitas knew he was a force to be reckoned with, but he wasn’t stupid enough to think he could take on seven pissed off Keyblade wielders on his own.

What a cruel twist of fate to have him slain by the two people he despised the most – the one who gave him his half-baked heart and the one who gave him his face. Their lights were strong like eternal flames against an endless night sky, but the shadow they cast together was even stronger. Vanitas and Sora had clashed before, once in La Cité des Cloches and again in Monstropolis, but something about the gormless expression that marred his twin's face after realising that the two were near identical made the jet-black hairs on Vanitas' neck stand up in agitation.

Vanitas was a damn fool, allowing his emotions to consume him like that. There was no reason for the uncharacteristic shock on Sora’s face to get him so riled up, but seeing the reflection of his own features distorted in such a pathetic display of weakness made him want to wipe that look off his face forever. Funny, letting his emotions get the better of him turned out to be his own weakness. He was ashamedly sloppy, so consumed with rage that his vision narrowed and the only thoughts that ran through his head were of separating the brunette’s head from his body; he let his guard down, and Sora was more than willing to take advantage of that.

Vanitas wasn’t even all that upset about being defeated. Every negative emotion that sprouted from his heart spilled more Unversed into the world, and the pain that tore through him each time one was slain only increased their numbers exponentially. His own existence was the source of his torment, and the black-haired Keyblade wielder was open to any solution that would take him away from it all no matter how drastic. Sora had tried to convince him to stay in the Realm of Light, even after kicking his ass; the brat was terminally insufferable and clearly hadn’t thought about why Vanitas would even side with Xehanort in the first place, but Ventus understood. He prayed that his brother accepting darkness back into his heart would allow the two to merge fully and Vanitas would no longer exist as his own entity. He could go back to being part of Ventus, as he was always meant to be. Whether that happened willingly or unwillingly didn’t matter to him anymore.

So when Vanitas was unceremoniously regurgitated back into the Realm of Darkness, he cursed every God that existed with words that would’ve made Hades blush.

The sensation of salt water in his lungs hit him like a freight train, a violent stab of fear sinking its razor-sharp claws into his heart. He instinctively sucked in with panic, drawing yet more water into his screaming lungs and sending his vision spinning. The raven Keyblade wielder could barely tell up from down but somehow breached the surface of the ocean, spluttering up inky water and gasping for air. His hair was plastered to his face and blocking his view, the jet black strands blending in with the oily waters until there was barely any distinction. Fighting through the stinging
in his amber eyes from the brine he splashed his way towards shore, his movements uncoordinated as the panic refused to budge until he felt solid ground below his feet.

He lay morosely on the cool grey sands for longer than he would admit, his throat hoarse from coughing up the fluid in his lungs and eyes burning. Vanitas had experienced no pain at his defeat, even as the two Keyblade smashed into his chest and stomach and shattered whatever bones lay beneath his skin. There was only peace, praying that he would finally be granted a reprieve after years of struggling with the agony that came with his control over the Unversed. The brief moment of acceptance that was shared between the two halves of the single heart that he and Ventus shared had filled him with hope; perhaps his defeat would allow him and his brother to become whole once more.

Vanitas didn’t know what he was expecting. Shame on him for believing that the universe would be kind enough to release him from his torment. Give them an inch, and watch them take a mile. It was Ventus’ fault for not accepting him back into his heart; it was Sora’s fault for saving Ventus in the first place; it was Xehanort’s fault for tearing the raven boy out of Ventus and tossing him into a world that didn’t want him; it was his own fault for being too weak to fight back. It was everyone’s fault and no one’s fault, and he didn’t know which hurt more. Having nowhere to direct his hate left him feeling lost and unwanted. Maybe he deserved it after all the bad things he had done in the name of the Seekers of Darkness.

Well, he was here now. He was alive. Nothing he could do about it.

It only made sense for a creature comprised of pure darkness to reside within the Realm of Darkness anyway – Vanitas just had to make the most of it. The Heartless here drastically outnumbered any he had seen before, but now that they were effectively leaderless there was little resistance from the mindless beasts. Most were happy to wander around aimlessly, more interested in fighting each other than the black-haired boy amongst their midst, scrapping over the tiniest morsel of light that trickled down from Kingdom Hearts that ominously hovered in the sky above. Sora obviously hadn’t destroyed the heart of all hearts, merely sealing it within its prison in the Realm of Darkness ready to be summoned by the next megalomaniac in line to get their grimy hands on the $\chi$-blade. He hoped that Sora would take good care of the weapon. He was probably using it as a golf club right about now.

Vanitas had wondered how Aqua managed to survive as long as she did in the Realm of Darkness with only her wits and her Keyblade to back her up, but the longer he remained submerged in the inky depths the more he understood. Day and night were merely abstract concepts, the sickly blue glow of Kingdom Hearts overhead a perpetual sight as if time had completely stood still. Combined with his lack of visceral need to eat or sleep, his circadian rhythm was thrown off almost immediately. It felt like he had spent only a couple days in his new prison, but it could have been months. There was just nothing to compare it to.

Vanitas hated to admit it, but he was deathly bored. Even the most powerful of Heartless, as uncommon as they were now, barely held a candle to his own strength and he could slice through them like warm butter. There was only so much lying on that cursed beach, staring up at the sky and wishing that the stars that had once glinted back at him would reveal themselves that he could take. There was a deep, dark part of his heart that sorely missed the Realm of Light and its inhabitants. He wasn’t delusional enough to hold any kind of emotional attachments to the brats that were responsible for his current situation in the first place, but the raven boy hadn’t met anyone else that was able to give him the challenge that he craved. His Keyblade-hand was itching for a fight, and the brain-dead Shadows weren’t cutting it.

Vanitas had tried to escape once. It didn’t go very well.
He mostly just zoned out whenever Xehanort went on one of his maniacal rants, but some of his words must’ve sunken into his brain at one point. Between raving about the nature of hearts and the **POWER OF DARKNESS™** the old man had mentioned the ‘Door to Light’, although only in passing. Vanitas had heard enough about light and darkness to last him an entire lifetime, but compared to the endless ocean of nothingness that surrounded him, it was worth at least giving it a shot. He had been shot like a cannonball into the ocean on his first arrival in the Realm of Darkness, disoriented and his mouth filled with the taste of copper, so perhaps the ocean would also hold the key to his escape.

If the ocean was a metaphorical key, then he must hold the physical ‘key’, right? Vanitas wouldn’t consider himself an intellectual but those damn Keyblades seemed to unlock literally anything that could be considered a ‘lock’ even in the most abstract sense. He was pretty sure Sora had even used his to play minigames with those illustrated woodland animals. How he hadn’t broken the weapon eons ago was beyond him. Vanitas’ own connection to the Void Gear was a little weaker now, betraying duration that he had truly gone without summoning it as his sense of time continued to wane, but it still heeded his call. The Keyblade was one of his few remaining connections to his identity – if he ever lost it he wasn’t sure how much of himself he would lose alongside it.

Summoning his Keyblade and squinting as the burst of light that accompanied it threatened to blind him in comparison to the impenetrable darkness surrounding him, Vanitas closed his yellow eyes and tried to focus. He had used enough Corridors of Darkness to at least have an idea of how this worked – if he concentrated his mind on his memories of the place he wished to travel to, his Keyblade would open a path for him. Even for the half-heart that pulsed in his chest, the chain of memories still held as steadfast as ever. The black-haired boy didn’t know if the Door to Light connected to a specific place, or if it even existed at all, but the last ground that his feet had touched was the scorched wasteland of the Keyblade Graveyard. It would have to do.

Taking a deep breath, Vanitas forced himself to dig up those stale memories from the locked vault of his mind. How Terra-Xehanort had complained about being partnered with him, seeing the raven boy as nothing more than a failed Replica not worth his time. How Aqua had looked at him with such venomous malice that was so foreign to her soft features, and Ven looked at him with pity that scorched his insides. How his strength hadn’t been enough, how it was never enough.

The memories now painfully hanging at the forefront of his mind, he raised the Void Gear and pointed it towards the horizon across the rippling black ocean. Yellow eyes squeezed shut and knuckles white with the effort, he opened his heart and called out into the darkness.

…

Nothing happened.

“**GOD DAMNIT!**” Vanitas bellowed and stabbed the Keyblade into the sand below him in frustration. “**LET ME OUT OF HERE!**”

Only the sound of his own gravelly voice echoed back to him. A single tear threatened to slide out of his right eye as he clung onto the embedded hilt of the Void Gear, his forehead resting against the pommel in resignation. Vanitas was a powerful being of darkness, not some crybaby Guardian of Light. He should’ve known better than to think the Door to Light would respond to the pleading of a being with no light in their heart. His light was living it up in relative peace, probably sipping cocktails on the warm sands of the Destiny Islands surrounded by friends who loved and cared about him. Vanitas didn’t have anybody like that in his life, and the light that continued to burn within Ventus’ heart would keep him alive until it eventually snuffed itself out.
Nobody would come for him. He was where he belonged.

Sora had no idea how long he’d spent floating around in the endless sea of darkness, but it must have been an eternity.

He couldn’t put a finger on the moment he had woken up surrounded by nothing but numb inky black, as if he had existed in that state since the beginning of time. Part of his mind was sure there was something before all this, but the longer he remained incorporeal the larger the holes in his heart became until they threatened to swallow his entire identity in one gulp. He didn’t even have a physical form at first, existing as nothing more than a heart without a body floating wherever the undulating darkness sought to take him. Something about that seemed awfully familiar, the sensation of losing a heart to darkness and leaving his body behind as a husk, but the memory was so faded that it slipped through his fingers like smoke.

He was just so damn tired. The void was like the vacuum of space, sucking away at any flicker of life or light until entropy took it and extinguished it forever. It took all of Sora’s willpower to hold on to his light, the only remnant of who he was before he was lost to the abyss. He didn’t know, but he knew his heart was strong. His light was strong. There were people who had depended on it before, and there were people that still did. Sometimes he swore he heard voices in the dark calling out to him, two male and one female, their voices growing increasingly desperate and increasingly muffled as the darkness that encased him became more impenetrable by the day.

He suspected that they were just an illusion created by his desperate heart, but it was all he had in the darkness. Even if a single person was waiting for him to return, he could cling to it and draw strength and hope. Sure, he didn’t know where he was going from or returning to, but he could figure the details out later.

Someone had once told him that the worlds were connected, all under the same sky. He had no face to connect with the message, but something about it rung true.

Sora used the time to try and pieces his memories back together. It wasn’t like there was anything else for an incorporeal heart to do anyway. Every time those voices reached his heart, a little bit of his identity came back as if he was developing photos in a darkroom, giving him snapshots into his life. A boy with silver hair and a girl with red hair, the three of them sitting together on a tree with a crooked trunk and laughing together. Two boys with blonde hair, both identical but nothing alike, and a girl with black hair who only had a face when Sora didn’t think about her. There were so many others, so many hearts that were connected to his own with tiny red strings. Sometimes the thread that bound all the hearts together became so thin that it was almost invisible, but it was there nonetheless.

As his memories became more tangible to his shattered heart his body followed suit. Sora had almost forgotten what it was like to physically exist, to feel the rushing of blood through his veins out to his extremities and the pressure in his chest with each breath. He recalled a time where he existed as a ghost in a world of blue skies and water, watching his own image repeat the same motions over and over, and the presence of a lost star with no name and a grey Dream Eater with a nagging voice.

He remembered something about a ‘Reaper’s Game’, but just the thought of the words made the gaping void residing inside his newly reformed chest expand like a black hole. In the same way that the brunette's other memories were returning to him and slotting back into place, his memories of the ‘Reapers Game’ had no puzzle pieces that matched. It was as if the pieces had been stolen from him and obliterated so that they would never slot back into place again.

Sora wondered if Naminé would know anything about that; she always seemed to have one foot
stuck in his memories.

Eventually his body reformed enough for Sora to open his eyes. The only knowledge he had of his surroundings came from the little info gleamed from the river of darkness that eddied against his heart, not even realising that he had been blind until he was gifted the ability to see. The exquisite stained glass windows and towering pillars of blue were a sight for sore eyes, literally and figuratively. Sora had been here many times before – the Station of Awakening straddled the line between life and death, a manifestation of his own heart that appeared to him in his dreams and kept asking him to chose between a sword, a staff, and a shield. He still wasn’t sure why he couldn’t just take all three – he did have two hands after all.

This wasn’t how Sora remembered his Station, although it had been a while since his boots last tapped against the reinforced glass that seemed to flow beneath him like lava. The mosaic under him that showed his own visage wrapped in peaceful sleep, surrounded by the faces of the friends he held closest to his heart, was shattered to the point that he barely recognised his own face. Everything from the waist down was missing as if something had dragged its claws through the glass and cleaved chunks way until nothing remained. He could almost make out three individual points of impact, but what little remained of his Station was marred with cracks like it would break off and tumble into the abyss at the slightest movement.

Sora had see this before. This is how Ventus’ Station of Awakening appeared to him, the first time the two had connected their hearts. In his case, the missing pieces of his mosaic had been torn away to form Vanitas.

So what had happened to the lost pieces of Sora’s heart to put his own Station on the brink of vanishing forever like this?

He squinted his sapphire eyes, peering into the impenetrable veil of darkness that surrounded the lone pillar. Where were all the lavish doors and endless staircases that littered the place like he remembered? Sora’s heart had enough space in it to support not only his own life, but also that of three others without stretching itself too thin, not to mention the piles and piles of data that Ansem the Wise kept dumping inside of it for safe keeping. There was no way this single pillar jutting out of the abyss was all that the brunette had left of himself. If he focused hard enough he could make out minuscule flecks of dim light, other hearts just like him caught in the underflow and carried to their final resting place.

Kingdom Hearts. They were all going towards Kingdom Hearts.

Most lost souls would be ecstatic at the thought of joining with their brethren within the endless light that radiated from the heart of all hearts, but the knowledge only filled Sora with dread. Nobody knew for sure what lay beyond the event horizon, but no heart had ever returned from its depths except for the single instance where Xemnas had cleaved a hole straight through it, hearts spilling out from within and coalescing into mindless Heartless. The closer he drew to that pale icy light, the more his own light was eclipsed and out-shone, and the more distant those voices became. He had spent such a long time putting himself back together, for it all to have amounted to nothing was a prospect that he refused to accept. There were so many hearts calling out for him and begging for him to return to them; he couldn’t let them down.

Sora didn’t know if he still remembered how to use his lungs, but he had to try. Taking in as much of the dense air as he could until it felt like his chest would burst, he wailed into the darkness as loud as his vocal cords would allow. The tearing sensation in his throat betrayed the disuse of his voice, but the pain was just a reminder that he was real, a physical sensation that was so rare to him that it almost tasted sweet. The void was so viscous like syrup that the sound barely travelled, absorbed by
the darkness around him as if he was in a sound-proof chamber.

A small burst of light radiated out in front of him, responding to his cries.

It was so faint that he almost missed it, but it was there. A tiny flash of light, dimmer and darker than any that had floated past him before and barely standing out against the endless sea of obsidian, but it was there. Someone had responded to his call for help. If he hadn’t spent such a long time staring at nothing but oily black then he might not have even noticed the small burst of light, but even the faintest spark stood out against the unchanging backdrop. Feeling his blood rushing through his head with adrenaline, Sora called out to the light again.

“Hey, can you hear me?” he yelled hoarsely. “I’m here! You’ve found me!”

He reached out a hand instinctively to touch the light; perhaps it was the Door to Light welcoming him back to the worlds that lay beyond it, or it was the heart of one of his friends reaching out to him. No matter how hard he strained his shoulder the light never seemed to come any closer to him, as if it was somehow resisting his presence. Who would possibly respond to his cries yet decline him assistance? It was as if the response was involuntary, like it was struggling against the urge to cry back to him. Sora didn’t have the freedom to question the motive: he was so close to fading away that he needed to take any opportunity he could. Letting this chance for freedom to slip away from him was just not option.

The light was so faint he almost believed for a moment that he was hallucinating it, the last vestigial struggle of a failing heart, but as his faith began to waiver his ears rung with a chorus of countless hearts calling back to him. The stars that fluttered alongside him increased in luminosity as if their own light was empowering the faint light that he was clamouring for, bolstering it until Sora could barely stand to keep his eyes open. He had forgotten how light felt against his skin, the warmth caressing it until it almost burned like those hazy days he spent on the islands.

He wondered if this was how Ventus felt when he plucked the blonde Keyblade wielder from the grasp of darkness. It was oddly fitting.

The light that was previously so far away was now so close that Sora could barely make each heart out from the next. Perhaps he was dying, but this felt nothing like the first time he passed away in the Keyblade Graveyard. It was a little disturbing that he even had that experience to compare anything to. If he closed his eyes he could hear the voices of all his friends, shouting at him to just hang on a little longer, until it drowned out his own thoughts. If he had been able to see anything other than the endless tsunami of light, he would have witnessed a single pathway appear behind him, barely clinging on to the broken edge of his stained glass image and disappearing into the abyss, connecting his fading heart to another that remained shrouded deep within the darkness.

It would be OK; he had done this for many others before. Now it was his time.

*Let’s open the door. Together.*

If Vanitas had spent any more time pacing he would have worn a trench into the sandy beach.

He still wasn’t completely sure what had happened to him, but the aching in his chest as if his organs were suddenly taking up too much room had refused to budge. The only sounds for miles around were the gentle breaking of waves against the black sand and Vanitas’ cursing, not an unusual occurrence since he was unceremoniously dropped into the icy cold ocean however long ago. A few
Heartless had attempted to approach the shores to investigate the commotion but whether it was because of the furious raven-haired Keyblade wielder or the Keyblade itself that was still embedded into the sand, none dared to brave the cloud of wrath that hung overhead.

“Stupid Guardians of Light… more trouble than they’re worth… always getting in my way…”

The throbbing ache in his chest only continued to grow as he became more and more agitated. He had tried and failed to summon the Door to Light and spent a few minutes reflecting on his situation and definitely not moping and feeling sorry for himself when he heard the yelling. At first he was sure the Guardians of Light had found him, either coming to drag him back kicking and screaming or to just finally put him out of his misery, but the longer the screaming went on the more apparent it became that it was coming from his own heart.

Someone was insistently trying to get his attention, but he wasn’t sure who. He had huffed and thrown himself into the sand, crossing his arms stubbornly and refusing to answer. The last time someone had called out for his heart, Xehanort had roped him into yet another of his crazy schemes. As desperate as Vanitas was to escape the miserable wastelands he was currently stuck in, he wasn’t desperate enough to become someone’s flunky again. He would do it on his own, he just needed to figure out the whole ‘light’ shtick and he could be on his way.

But the yelling hadn’t stopped. There was a moment where it seemed to pause for a metaphorical breath before continuing even louder and more obnoxiously than before. Vanitas instinctively clenched both hands over his ears to try and block the noise out, but it echoed around his head and in his heart, refusing to be ignored. Whatever was causing it was really persistent and was specifically targeting him. His vision swam and stars flickered behind his eyelids as the noise replaced any of his own thoughts until he was sure he would be swallowed by the light.

He would’ve given anything to stop the pain. Then it did stop, and he suddenly had a ‘stowaway’.

You were the closest that answered.

Vanitas groaned again and rested his pounding head in his hands. It was bad enough that he had to see Sora’s face looking back at him in every mirror but now he had the insufferable brunette in his head! He still remembered the forlorn look in those sapphire eyes as the raven boy chose to fade away after his defeat. Ventus at least understood and respected his decision, but Sora was never able to comprehend how someone could willingly resign themselves to the endless abyss. His light was so overwhelmingly bright that the kid had never considered any other possibility.

“What a pain in the ass,” Vanitas groaned to himself. In stating that he would do what it took to get the yelling to shut up for two minutes he had essentially invited Sora into his heart. The thought had passed through his head so fleetingly that he had no time to consider the consequences. Shoulda just left him.

No one else came.

Vanitas considered his options, which were admittedly exceedingly limited with his current imprisonment in the Realm of Darkness. He was defeated long before Sora was able to face off against Xehanort, and part of his mind suspected that this was intentional. The old man was just insane enough to purposely ensure that the brunette was triumphant so the two could fight mano-a-mano, the rest of his clones thrown at Sora as mere obstacles to weaken him but not destroy him. Larxene and Marluxia had planned to abandon ship as soon as the going got tough, and Demyx and Vexen had betrayed them and provided the means for Roxas to get his own Replica body, so it seemed he wasn’t the only one to have suspicions about Xehanort’s ulterior motives.
What was concerning him most was that Vanitas hadn’t lived long enough to see the result of their inevitable clash, and if Sora was here with him now as just a tiny sliver of his heart, then had Xehanort won?

Sora was in such a bad state that Vanitas was surprised his heart hadn’t just become a Heartless already. The brunette’s light was so overwhelming that it was able to support not only his own life but also the hearts of three others alongside it, four if he counted himself. The heart that was currently residing in his own chest like a squatter barely held the light of a newborn, so dull and faint that it was almost unrecognisable. If it hadn’t been for the flashes of crystal blue eyes and chocolate brown hair that accompanied the incorporeal voice, he would’ve thought he’d just lost his mind. He still hadn’t completely ruled that possibility out.

Vanitas huffed and retrieved his Keyblade, the Void Gear vibrating softly in his grip as the connection was reforged between them at the simple touch. He couldn’t deny that he was marginally pissed off at Sora’s admission – the fact that he was only reached out to because the other hearts in line hadn’t responded to the brunette’s pleas hurt his ego a little, but it also deepened his sense of concern. The only person who could rival Xehanort in regards to numbers of people sharing his heart was Sora, pieces of himself inevitably left over in his Nobody even after he got his own body. And his other Nobody. And whatever the hell Naminé was. And whatever the hell he was. And the data version of him…

Never mind, one Sora was already one too many.

Vanitas was surprised there was anything remaining of Sora’s heart, seeing as he was so willing to hand out pieces of it to anyone who asked until there was nothing left. The idea of the Keyblade wielder falling in battle to Xehanort was becoming less likely the more he considered it – Sora’s heart was so full of holes at this point that if he had been killed, there was no way his heart would’ve survived on what little energy it had left over. The raven boy tried to remind himself that time didn’t flow normally in the Realm of Darkness, so while it was possible that Sora had floated around in the void for years and been none the wiser, it was equally possible that it had only been a couple of minutes.

*It’s a long story.*

His beaming yellow eyes were suddenly drawn to something bobbing in the inky black water, a metallic glint reflecting the blue light of Kingdom Hearts like it was winking at him. The waves rolled against it and pushed it towards the shore as if it was trying to deliver its payload directly into Vanitas’ hands. He allowed the Void Gear to dismiss itself from his slack grip and picked his way towards the unknown item, the gentle waves soaking through the seams of his boots and stinging his toes with an icy touch.

The item was not something Vanitas was familiar with, but it seemed to be some kind of technological device. The screen was cracked and warped with water damage, several inches across yet compact enough to fit in his hand, and a flashing red light in one corner that blinked at him like a beacon. The device was encased with something that had a rubbery texture, the colours faded as if sun-bleached but still held the echoes of bright red and yellow. As Vanitas grazed his finger across the surface the screen flickered to life at his touch, displaying a message that it was scanning the face of whoever had roused it from its slumber.

Vanitas yelped and almost dropped the device at the indication that it was probing him for his secrets, but it seemed to be happy with what it found and revealed its contents to him.

*THAT’S MY GUMMIPHONE! GIMME!*
Sora excitedly flicked through the apps on his phone, the screen moving painfully slowly because of how much damage it had endured and dropping his inputs left and right. His muscle memory guided him straight to the messaging app they used and he impatiently waited for it to load. There was almost no chance of the phone managing to make any calls in its current broken condition, not to mention that he didn’t even know if the Realm of Darkness got any signal, but if there was any chance of being rescued then it was through his friends. Hell, if he could load the messages then he could even figure out how long he had been gone!

A tear almost squeezed its way down his cheek at the sight of those usernames, the messages slowly trickling in one by one as the Gummiphone was used for the first time in who knows how long. Kairi, Riku, Roxas… the only ones not part of their collaborative group chat were the few apprentices that had remained by Ansem’s side, and that was only because Ienzo was the only one who even knew how to use a phone. Sora never got to see how his journey had ended, not after he was lost to the darkness when Kairi’s heart was restored, but he still recalled his promise to Naminé. Hopefully someone found her in the Final World and got her out.

Strange… the phone didn’t seem to be loading any new messages for him. The most recent one was only sent a couple of minutes ago, and it was sent by him when Keyblade Hero 3 had landed in Scala Ad Caelum. No responses to his text came through, and Sora struggled to believe that he had truly only been gone for a few minutes. Either those who had remained behind had abandoned the chat, or his phone just wasn’t able to connect to the cloud and feed any new messages through to him. He prayed with every fibre of his being that it was the latter.

Well, he wouldn’t know if he didn’t try. Wincing at the blinking red light, blaring at him to indicate the device was running low on battery and with no way to charge it, he needed to make good use of what little power was available to him.

aoSora: hello? testing 1 2 3 can ny1 hear me?
aoSora: i only have like 20% battrey left so if u can hear me now wud b a gd time 2 reply

Vanitas was already at his wits end with the situation, so the feeling of someone shoving him into the back seat of his own body and then driving it around was not one he was willing to deal with. He and Sora shared a lot more in common that just their faces – they were both equally confused about what was going on – but the two had vastly differing ideas about how they were going to unjelly their jam. The raven boy was not about to hand himself over to the Guardians of Light so they could lock him up and interrogate him: they were still his mortal enemies. He couldn’t rely on Sora’s presence to talk them out of any violent tendencies that tickled their fancies.

...

Huh, no response.

Vanitas almost jumped out of his skin as something cold and hard banged against his ankle and sent pain shooting up his shins. Thinking he was being attacked while he was distracted by whatever the hell a ‘Gummiphone’ was, he jumped back a couple of paces and prepared to summon his Keyblade, fumbling with the phone as he tried not to drop it in the water again. Who knows just how much more water damage it could take before it was rendered useless.

The waters weren't done with washing up the contents of Sora's sock drawer, it seemed.

It was extremely rusted and stained a deep gold with wear and tear, but there was no doubt about it. It was Sora's Keyblade. 'Kingdom Key' or whatever dumb name he gave the thing. A chill ran down his spine at the sight of the discarded blade, a feeling that reverberated in his chest as Sora's own heart shared the sentiment. He bent down and wrapped his hand around the leather hilt, lifting it up
to eye level and inspecting the weapon. The ethereal silver glow was marred by layer of rust and dirt, the keychain broken clean off and nowhere to be found, and one of the teeth was bent as if a bone had been snapped. Even hidden under layers of grime, the light that was encased within the weapon still shone through and warmed his palm as it thrummed under his touch.

The only reason a Keyblade would ever exist without its master, was if its master was dead.

_I don't know if I died... I don't remember. Wouldn't be the first time, though._

Vanitas puffed out his cheeks in exasperation and glanced back down to the awaiting Gummiphone, Sora's messages still present on the screen with no responses loaded or perhaps even submitted. He was a bit of an old man when it came to using technology, but it didn't seem too hard??

aoSora: if ur gettn these mssgs ven is a lil bitch pass it on
aoSora: guardians of lite go home

Vanitas swore he could hear Sora let out a barking laugh right into his ear, but it passed so quickly that he wasn't convinced that he hadn't just imagined it. The raven Keyblade wielder had spent so long staring at the same stretch of charcoal beach that he wouldn't be surprised if he had lost his mind. What kind of Seeker of Darkness would he be anyway if he didn't take every opportunity to poke fun at the light and their multiple oversized door keys? If they weren't willing or able to reply to the desperate pleading of their missing friend then perhaps they would reply to some cajoling.

Still, the lack of response was weighing heavily on Vanitas' heart, and he wasn't sure why. Perhaps Sora was just getting to him and his emotions were leaking through the frail barrier between their hearts, or he had just gone soft, but the moment that the brunette had remarked he had been calling _VANITAS_ of all people was the only one to answer didn't fit in with anything he understood about the Guardians of Light. The raven boy had fully expected to spent the rest of his days in the dreary prison that was the Realm of Darkness, at least until Ventus decided he had enough of his moping and came to finish him off for good, but _Sora_? He had legions of people willing to follow every step he took, people who would throw their lives down at his feet at just the mention of his name.

Were they really so willing to ignore the guy that had given pieces of his own heart for them and leave him to die?

Sora gripped the soft rubber casing of the phone harder, grateful that it was protective enough to shield his exposed hands from the shards of glass screen hanging loose. Vanitas was wrong. He was _wrong_. There were a million reasons why none of his friends had found him in the darkness, why they weren't answering his messages or his cries for salvation. He just had to think of them... Agony gripped his chest as he refused to accept that he had been abandoned. Not after everything they had promised each other. They would come eventually. Right?

aoSora: pls guys im so cold i miss u i want 2 cum home pls respond

Vanitas wasn't really one for moping about his situation, but whatever emotion Sora was battering him with was so powerful he couldn't defend his own heart against it. How the others who shared fragments of Sora's heart had managed to keep their own identities intact against the waves of light that washed against him like a tsunami was beyond him. The watery tear that had lingered around the edge of his vision finally slipped free and cascaded down his cheek, glittering like diamonds under the icy light of Kingdom Hearts. Vanitas firmly wiped it away with one arm and stood up so quickly that his head spun with the effort.

"Yeah, I'm not going to sit around and feel sorry for you," he remarked with a deadpan expression.
"You can cry all you want, but if you're in my body then we follow my rules. Capiche?"

He didn't receive a reply, but the ten ton weight that had been sitting on his chest like a dumbbell slowly lifted. Vanitas took that as a sign of agreement. Whenever Sora - or whatever piece of Sora was left – spoke to him, it echoed around inside his head as if it was bouncing off the back of his eyeballs and gave him a headache. Thankfully the brunette was so weak that it was a struggle to get more than a single sentence out of him. Vanitas was more that happy for it to stay that way.

He was loathe to admit it, but the Guardians of Light were their best bet at any kind of freedom. Even if Vanitas was able to dig them out of the hole the two had found themselves in and escape the Realm of Darkness on his own, he was faced with the realisation that he didn't exactly have many allies to fall back on. If Xehanort was still alive and kicking he would be absolutely delighted to have Vanitas deliver what remained of Sora's presence to him. If he wasn't then the two would be on their own, and he didn't have the foggiest clue how to get the brunette out of his heart. Not out of concern for the weakened heart that still faintly beat besides his own. More for his own sanity.

You have the key.

Vanitas had all but forgotten that the Kingdom Key was still present in his right hand. Normally a Keyblade would reject anyone trying to manipulate its power if they were not their master, but the blade pulsed with a warmth that kept steady pace with his own heartbeat. Perhaps it sensed that the boy grasping it was holding Sora's heart inside of him, or maybe it was just yet another individual that wasn't able to tell the two apart. Vanitas didn't care all that much about the how or why, even in its beaten up state a Keyblade was a Keyblade. Not only that but it was a Keyblade of light, a direct opposition to his Void Gear which was born from the same suffocating darkness that he himself had been regurgitated out of.

Vanitas couldn't summon the Door to Light, but maybe Sora could.

Strengthening his grip on the Kingdom Key and cringing as the rust caking the hilt crumbled under his touch, he closed his yellow eyes and raised the blade up towards the sky. The weapon was unnaturally lightweight in comparison to the Void Gear, as if he was holding a plastic sword. It was a little jarring. Vanitas had hoped he wouldn't need to subject himself to experiencing those memories of the Keyblade Graveyard again within his lifetime, but fate didn't have him on its good cards so he expected nothing less. Recalling how the dust stung his eyes in those endless wastelands and the heat burned against his pale flesh, he called out once more with his heart and begged for an answer.

That's not where the Door to Light leads! Here, I've got you covered.

The sudden burst of light was enough to make the insides of Vanitas' closed eyelids glow pink, a rush of energy shooting down his arm and out the tip of the Keyblade as if it was an extension of himself. Raising his other arm and crossing his eyes with it in a futile effort to protect himself from the blinding light, the beam that arced across the sky smashed against an invisible wall and formed the shape of a Keyhole, twisting and warped as the light moved across the surface. It was so overwhelming that for a moment it outshone the glow of Kingdom Hearts suspended above him, and sent the few Heartless that had been watching the raven boy argue with himself scattering in fear.

The sound of something unlocking with a heavy click filled his head, and the door opened. It was as if a giant rectangle had been cut straight out of the fabric of reality itself, the edges sharp as a knife and spewing light from inside at an astonishing rate. Vanitas didn't know what to say. He hated the light and everything it represented, but looking at the gateway to his freedom standing right in front of him and welcoming him with open arms left him lost for words. He wondered if this was what the
The look of amazement on his face soon gave way to an evil smirk. The Guardians of Light could go jump off a bridge for all he was concerned. Sora had every right to be angry that his so-called ‘friends’ had left him for dead, and even if the brunette himself didn’t wish to seek revenge, **Vanitas** had no problem doing it for him.

He snapped a quick shot of the Door to Light on the broken Gummiphone and sent it to the vacant group chat, eager to rub his development in their faces.

```
@Sora: u guys r useles typical lite users
@Sora: well guess wat
@Sora: ill just do it myself
@Sora: c u l8r losers
```

He could feel Sora grumbling in his chest, but he ignored it. The Kingdom Key still vibrating in his hand as if it was right at home, Vanitas sped off towards his means of escape. The flowing ocean didn't give way beneath him, forming a solid path to carry him towards the Door to Light. He couldn't keep his ecstatic laughter in his chest, pealing out across the water as the light seemed to reach out and pull him closer, beckoning him to his freedom. Even as the light overtook the edges of his vision until nothing else remained, his laughter never stopped.

They thought they had seen the last of him. They were so very, **very** wrong.

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Riku knew that it was unfair to resent his friends for losing faith in Sora, but there were still days where he wasn’t able to stop himself.

The moment that Sora had returned with Kairi only to slip through their fingers was still burned into his retinas. He saw it every time he blinked, every time he slipped into sleep, he would almost swear that he had imagined the whole thing if it wasn’t for the shared recollection between everyone unfortunate enough to have been present that day. Riku knew they had been relaxing together, playing volleyball on the sun-scorched sands, but his memory was tainted by such overwhelming grief that it was as if nothing else had taken place that day. Nothing except for the sight of Kairi and Sora sitting on the crooked trunk of the Paopu tree together, the setting sun framing them and highlighting their hair as if they had halos.

Then he blinked and Kairi was alone.

There was a part of his heart that knew what Sora would be saying to him right now if he was able to. The brunette would tell him that everything had gone to plan, that he knew the risks and made the decision to face the consequences of chasing after ghosts, that it was his decision to do so and no one else’s and so there was only himself to blame. That part of his heart grew quieter every day, just the same as the house that once rung with laughter and now echoed with chilling silence.

He was Sora’s Dream Eater. It was **his** job to protect his friend from his nightmares and accompany him wherever he went. And he didn’t. Riku had looked his best friend in the eye and seen the resolute conviction that lay within, and had let him go alone. He let Sora go. Sora could deny just how affected he had been when Riku was crowned a Keyblade Master and he wasn’t until he was blue in the face, that didn’t make it true. The brunette cared so little what others thought about his skill at that point, especially considering that he had saved the multiverse more times than could be counted on two hands; the only person he had to prove himself to was **himself**. Riku couldn’t bring himself to take that away from him.
Besides, even with the most impossible odds working against him, Sora always managed to find his way home. Until the one time that he didn’t.

Kairi couldn’t tell them much about what had happened. She could describe the moments leading up to her death in painful detail, how Xehanort had kidnapped her to force Sora’s hand into providing the necessary ingredients for that **damned** χ-blade, the feeling of No Name slicing through her back like warm butter, how her heart had been cleaved from her body and cast aside before she was able to take a single breath. Everything after that point might as well not have even existed, until she was plucked from the darkness by Sora. How on earth the brunette had managed to track her down in the unknown void that lay beyond the land of the living was beyond him, but his friend had always managed to find a way. She described a warm light that filled her entire being as if the sun itself had descended upon her, then she was on the island with Sora by her side, and then it was just her.

There wasn’t a single person present that day that hadn’t dropped everything in order to take up arms and drag their missing friend home by his spiky brown hair. Riku was so used to having to act alone, either working from behind the scenes or disguised with someone else’s face, so the sensation of being surrounded by a small army of very angry and very motivated companions was something new to him. It was nice, knowing that he had people that were willing to back him up. He just wished it was under better circumstances.

The problem was that they didn’t even know where to begin.

Ventus was their best bet. The situation that Kairi had relayed to them through her intermittent tears was awfully similar to what he had experienced himself: Sora had opened his heart and bonded with the blonde’s shattered soul to saved him from the vicious grip of death. The only problem was that, in his case, Ventus’ heart had taken shelter inside of Sora’s while he recovered, and if the same was true with their current predicament then it would be **Kairi** that was missing, nestled within the unnaturally roomy space next to the brunette’s own heart. That led on to a second possibility, that Sora’s heart was actually hidden within Kairi herself. It didn’t take many examinations by the remaining apprentices of Ansem the Wise to determine that her chest was decided empty of Sora’s manic energy.

The only other option was that Sora was somewhere within the Realm of Darkness. Riku refused to acknowledge just how remote that possibility was, there was simply no other option. Sora would have to be there. While the silver-haired boy often felt like Keyblades were being handed out to everyone and their mother these days, there was a certain advantage to having eight Keyblade wielders ready to turn the Realm of Darkness upside down in search of their missing friend. Even Mickey had managed to tear himself away from his royal duties to join the search party, something that was becoming more and more uncommon as the days passed. Plus, Donald and Goofy would’ve actually killed him if he tried to refuse on the basis that they didn’t have the ability to wield weapons that could properly dispose of the Heartless. The two had more than proven themselves at that point anyway.

Every day that passed with no sign of that messy mop of chocolate spikes or those piercing sapphire eyes was a day where the sun might as well have not risen.

The King was the first to call it quits. Riku couldn’t find it in himself to blame the mouse – Disney Castle had taken a beating from the Heartless and had never properly recovered after the wicked thorns had infested the castle basement in their attempt to corrupt the Cornerstone of Light. Mickey had no choice but to leave the denizens to their own devices while he was away assisting in the war against the Seekers of Darkness. He was very good at hiding his emotions – he was a politician after all – but there was no hiding the pain and disappointment that the King had felt towards himself. He was more than willing to spend every day that he could searching for the tiniest trace of Sora’s
presence that might have remained, but his people needed his leadership.

Donald and Goofy had to-and-froed about going back with their King. Riku still wasn’t sure if he had made the right decision by convincing them to retreat, stating that the seven remaining Keyblade wielders were already more than enough to haul a single lazy brunette back home, and that they were the most valuable back at Disney Castle. They could use the library to search for any info that could help them, and they would have the Gummiship on call if the others needed to travel around quickly. The silver-haired boy got the distinct impression that they weren’t convinced he wasn’t trying to get rid of them because they didn’t have Keyblades themselves, but they relented. Riku was making an active effort to force himself to abide solely by the rules of logic, which might have resulted in him coming across a little callous. He was just so afraid that if he allowed his emotions to slip through then he would never be able to put them back into the little box that he kept hidden away.

He didn’t know who was the next to give up hope, but their numbers trickled down one by one.

It was Kairi herself who had finally pulled Riku to one side and demanded that he at least take a break from his futile searching. At some point it had become only him scouring the Realm of Darkness, using his existing exposure to the deadly nature of the shadows that lay within as an excuse to continue on his own, but there was no hiding the truth from the redhead. She begged him to let it go, to come back to Destiny Islands with her even if it was only to recuperate. He was running himself ragged trying to cover so much ground under his own strength and she could see the tiredness in his muscles and the bags under his eyes.

The sense of betrayal was insurmountable. Sora had given his own heart for Kairi’s safety, not even for the first time, and cast himself to the void so she could have a life of peace even if it had to be without him by her side. The prospect that she would forsake his sacrifice so easily was practically obscene. Sora had given so much for her, for everyone, how could she let it all be for nothing?! What was the point of going back to their homeworld if they were only returning as a pair, the third piece of their puzzle swept under the rug as if it had never existed?

Riku hated to admit it, but through her tears and pleading she was speaking the truth, however painful it may be. Between the gang back at Disney Castle and the gang at Hollo- ahem, Radiant Garden, there were still people working on the disastrous situation they were stuck in. He had promised her that he would never try and solve a problem on his own again, not when there were droves of willing helpers surrounding him and already giving their all in other ways. He still needed to remind himself that it was no longer necessary to bear the weight of the world solely on his own shoulders.

It was a little weird coming back to the island after all these years; it was almost like he had outgrown the place like a childhood sweater. The islands were stunning beautiful, even more than he had remembered, although his memories were tainted by the sight of the islands shrouded in darkness of his own creation, so he wasn’t the most reliable source. Even thought Riku knew that his friends were putting a lot of effort into making him and Kairi as comfortable as they could be, his heart still yearned for the exhilaration and excitement of travel to distant worlds. If it hadn’t been for the redhead giving him those insufferable puppy eyes and begging him to stay, he would’ve jumped ship months ago.

Riku and Wakka were in the midst of an intense pull-up competition when the call came.

Tidus had very sensibly opted to sit that one out, content to watch the veins on the two duelling boy’s foreheads pop as neither of them were willing to concede defeat to the other. The tree branch they were both hanging from groaned under their combined weight, bobbing up and down as the two repeatedly clenched their biceps and lifted their heads above the bark and allowed their bodies to
sink back down only to do it all over again. Neither of them were even counting at that point, so focused on trying to outdo the other that the game was just a matter of who would be the one to tap out first.

“Oi, Riku!” Tidus yelled, struggling to be heard over the strained grunting of the two boys still giving their all in their competition. “It’s Kairi, she’ll kill you if you don’t answer.”

The threat of the redhead’s wrath wasn’t worth beating Wakka at anything. Panting with exertion he allowed his grip to slacken and dropped ungracefully to the ground, wincing as his knees took all the force of the impact against the grass below him. He was really out of practice after all these months. Wakka let out a whoop of celebration and followed suit, punching the air and wiping away the sweat on his tanned brow that had evaded his blue headband.

“Oh ya, man! That’s one for me!”

Riku sternly ignored him and accepted his Gummiphone from Tidus, Kairi’s name flashing on the screen as the device insisted that he answer her pronto. It was quite rare for any of his friends to actually call each other, preferring the instant reply that the group chat afforded them, so if the socially anxious redhead to want to speak to him then it must be something important. Sliding his thumb across the screen to unlock it, he moved to lift the phone to his ear but wasn’t able to get that far before Kairi let her presence be known.

“RIKU! HAVE YOU SEEN IT YET?! I’M FREAKING OUT!”

Kairi belted down the phone so loudly that even Tidus and Wakka could hear her wailing and she wasn’t even on speakerphone. Riku winced as his eardrum threatened to pop with the excessive volume, opting to hold the device a few inches away from his head.

“Kairi, please stop yelling,” he insisted. “What are you talking abo- “

“NO I WONT STO- OK fine. I’m calm. Everything’s calm.”

Riku could hear Kairi audibly breathing slowly on the other end of the line. He felt a pang of fear cross his heart at the sign that his friend was having to actively control herself, worry setting in that perhaps she was in danger or someone was hurt. She was so sweet-natured that such an explosive outburst was almost completely unheard of. Tidus and Wakka seemed to be feeling the same way, similar expressions of concern marring their suntanned faces as they listened on. Riku turned his phone to loudspeaker so that the three of them could remain privy to their conversation. They had been friends for so long now that there were very few unbroken boundaries between them all anyway.

“Kairi, what’s wrong?” Riku probed. “Why are you so upset? Has something happened?”

“Oh my god, yes!” she belted back, her attempts at restraining her anxiety proving futile. “Do you not check your texts?! You need to get back to the house right now, it’s about Sora!”

Riku felt his heart skip a beat at the sound of that name. Kairi had practically refused to acknowledge their friend’s existence since the two moved back home to the Destiny Islands, her sorrow lingering just behind her ocean-blue eyes as if even speaking Sora’s name would’ve allowed the dam to burst. He swallowed deeply, his mouth suddenly as dry as the Agrabah desert and his breath catching in his throat.

“Alright, I’ll be back straight away.”
He hung up the line without even saying goodbye, something that had annoyed his friends at first but soon came to understand as just part of his abrupt nature. His thumb found its way to the Messenger app they used to speak with each other purely by muscle memory, the movement ingrained into his hand by the thousands of times he had made the motion before, and was immediately assaulted by a stream of texts that seemed to have no end.

number_imaginary: EVERYTHINGS HAPPENING SO MUCH ALL AT ONCE
notanobody: i knew i wasnt imagining it!!! hes still out there somewhere
Luna_Diviner: We need to remain calm and think carefully about what our next actions are.
Master_Aqua: Isa is right guys. We still have no clue where he might be texting us from.
10_year_nap: heck u aqua im not w8ing ny longer \ ( O `皿' O ) /
Master_Aqua: Language, Ven.
10_year_nap: sry

It seemed like every second that passed another message popped up, moving too fast for his mind to process as everyone attempted to speak at once. Riku’s mind refused to put two and two together, having already accepted that the likelihood of the brunette ever reappearing had passed the realm of possibility the moment they had collectively abandoned their search. Ignoring the feverish flow of texts, he scrolled upwards in an attempt to find the source of the commotion. He didn’t need to scroll far before his eyes zeroed in on the offending message, sent from a username that had not popped up for months despite how many times he had prayed for a single glimpse of it.

aoSora: hello? testing 1 2 3 can ny1 hear me?

“That’s Sora’s username…” Tidus remarked as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

He was right. That was Sora’s username.

That was Sora’s username.

Sora.
This chapter can be summarised as "KAIRI DOES A THING". Thanks for all the positive feedback, the real meat of the story begins in this chapter. And remember, Ven is a lil bitch, pass it on.

Kairi felt sick, but there was nothing in her stomach to bring up.

It was incredible just how much a single message could shake her to her core. Kairi knew she didn't have the mental resilience to remove herself from her emotions in the same way that some of her friends could, but she had put so much work into empowering herself so she could stand alongside them as not just a friend, but a powerful ally. A single message moving her so deeply that all rational thought was lost to the wind made her stomach churn inside of her. Kairi didn't know what to feel – should she be elated? Terrified? The redhead had dreamt of this day since the moment she was callously dumped on that damned tree only to watch her best friend slip through her fingers like smoke; now that she was actually living that reality… she didn't know how she should be reacting.

aoSora: hello? testin can ny1 hear me?

There they were. The words of a dead man, a friend who might as well have not existed, whose voice was silent and name unspoken. Kairi had all but refused to even think of those ocean-blue eyes, lit from within by a perpetual smile, because of the waves of agony that came with it, threatening to wash over her until she couldn't breath and would drown in her sorrow.

It was Sora. It was Sora.

aoSora: i only have like 20% battry left so if u can hear me now wud b a gd time 2 reply

Kairi couldn't bring herself to type a message in return. Her fingers hovered over the keypad of her Gummiphone, shaking so much that she was barely holding the device steady in her hands. What would she even say to him after all these months? How does she beg for forgiveness for that day she dragged Riku back home and the two left him to his fate? How does she explain her actions, that she never gave up hope but was unable to push herself hard enough to power through the pain? How does she answer for the fact that she wasn't able to bring him back like he had done for her?

aoSora: if ur gettn these mssgs ven is a lil bitch pass it on
aoSora: gaurdians of lite go home

Kairi slammed her Gummiphone down on the dark oak table and went outside for some fresh air. Her head was spinning so badly that she could hardly walk in a straight line, brushing against the framed photos of the three friends together that she refused to take down even as the months went down the drain. Not a night had passed her by that she didn't beg any God that would listen to take her in Sora's place, and not a night had passed that she awoke to found her prayers were ignored.

The night was sickly warm, as always; even without the scorching sun hovering in the sky overhead, Destiny Islands was never able to shake the blanket of humidity that clung to every rock and grain of sand. Kairi stood on the creaky wooden deck and took a deep breath, the smell of salt in her nose
from the roaring ocean. She knew deep in her heart that Riku was struggling with the move back to the islands – the silver-haired boy had been a nomad for so long that he had lost the ability to sit still – but Kairi’s heart had never stopped yearning for the tranquillity of their island paradise.

It just didn’t feel complete without Sora by her side. No amount of sea salt ice cream could fill the hole he had left in her heart when he gave his own life to wrench her from the depths of darkness. The redhead couldn’t imagine what the others were going through right now; Roxas and Xion owed their entire existence to the brunette, and Ventus would still be in his decade-long coma, perhaps slumbering in solitude until the end of time. Sora’s heart had become entangled in so many threads of fate.

Maybe one of those threads was about to lead him back home.

Shaking her head and brushing her ginger bangs out of her eyes, Kairi steeled her nerves and stepped back into the empty house. If there was ever a time to prove that she was capable of standing on her own two feet, then this was it. She could think about what to say to the brunette when he was safely in her arms. Any words worth saying would only be worth saying directly to his face. Her Gummiphone had basically never paused in its relentless vibrating, messages pouring in from the others as the sudden development sunk in to their collective minds. Sitting back down at the table, Kairi unlocked the phone with her fingerprint and scanned through the messages, quickly catching up with the tsunami of texts.

soHotImOnFire: it doesn’t look like he can see our texts he’s not replying to us
number_imaginary: SORA WE CAN SEE YOU
white_witch: guys i’m really really sorry, please don’t be mad at me
white_witch: but sora would never say something like that, would he?
Luna_Diviner: I agree, I would never expect such callous words from someone like him. Perhaps his Gummiphone has been stolen?
Luna_Diviner: *Gummiphone. Sorry, autocorrect.
number_imaginary: SORA IF YOU CAN SEE US PLS LET US KNOW
still_not_a_keyblade_master: doesn’t matter someone clearly has it n thats more than weve had for months
notanobody: xion ur 1 of my best friends but I stg ur stressing me out rn
number_imaginary: TELL US WHERE YOU ARE WE’LL COME AND GET YOU

Kairi’s thoughts lingered on Naminé’s message for a moment. Sora wasn’t exactly a budding Shakespeare when it came to his writing prowess, but the hurtful words he had posted were so out of character for the overly friendly brunette that Kairi couldn’t help but flinch at the thought of the phrase passing his lips. Even if he wasn’t receiving their messages and he had decided to try and provoke an answer out of them in frustration, there was no reality she could imagine in which the kind and empathetic Sora would say anything that would insult the people he held so close to his own heart. Her mind beginning to clear of the rising panic that had threatened to sweep her sensibility out from under her feet, the redhead finally felt it best to voice her opinion on the matter.

sweet_memories: listen, im kinda freaking out too but the fact that were getting messages at all means his phone has turned up somewhere
sweet_memories: maybe soras turned up alongside it
Master_Aqua: I agree wholeheartedly with Kairi, we need to find whoever has taken his Gummiphone and written those nasty things about my precious Ven and wring Sora’s location out of them. We need to remain calm, for Sora’s sake.
10_year_nap: im not a babby aqua it dusnt bother me im a big boye ( `^`)>
aoSora: pls guys im so cold i miss u i want 2 cum home pls respond
The queasiness that gripped Kairi's stomach doubled in intensity, right as Riku exploded through their shared front door, panting and covered in sweat as if he had sprinted back without stopping. That was exactly what he had done. The two met eyes, neither knowing the words to say, and spent a few seconds in complete silence. Not even Kairi's Gummiphone vibrated in her hands, the other participants in the conversation also stunned into silence at Sora's desperate cries into a void that refused to answer him. Riku wiped his brow with the back of his hand and took a deep breath.

"OK," he stated matter-of-factly, as if they were discussing where to eat for lunch and not the fate of their lost friend. "Someone has Sora's phone. What are we doing."

Kairi looked at him blankly. Riku was a solid cornerstone in their group, a natural born leader and one of only two Keyblade Masters within their ranks. For all he had never allowed that status to affect his relationship with any of his friends, the thought of the indomitable pillar of strength looking to her for advice stunned her into silence.

"I..." she eventually stammered out, ashamed of the uncertainty in her own voice. "I don't know."

The Gummiphone nestled in her palms vigorously sprung back to life as a series of messages filtered through. Kairi tore her eyes away from the cyan gaze of her best friend and affixed them to the screen, looking for any sign from Sora that would point them in the right direction.

\[\begin{align*}
aoSora: & \text{ u guys r useless typical lite users} \\
aoSora: & \text{ well guess wat} \\
aoSora: & \text{ ill just do it myself} \\
aoSora: & \text{ c u l8r losers}
\end{align*}\]

The messages were accompanied by an image file. Kairi felt Riku close the gap between them so he could peer down at her screen, not bothering to check his own messages as he often forgot to do. Holding her breath, she tapped on the image and gave it a moment to load, every second feeling like an entire lifetime as her anticipation condensed within her and weighed her stomach down. It was a blurry photo, extremely compressed and shot as if the camera was either damaged or being interfered with in some manner, but was clear enough to identify what appeared to be an expanse of deep indigo ocean framed with dark coal-like sand. Hovering just above the waterline was a sharp rectangle of white light, as if the shape had been cut straight out of the image leaving a void in its space.

"Kairi..." Riku squeezed out, his own breath caught in his throat as if all the moisture had left his body. "I know that place. That's where Sora and I turned up after we defeated Xemnas. That's the Door to Light."

Kairi looked on as Riku seemed to battle with his thoughts, his fists clenching and unclenching and cyan eyes squeezed shut. He looked up at the watching redhead and opened his mouth to say something, only to huff and cross his arms as he bit down the words hovering on the tip of his tongue. After a moment of silence he swore quietly under his breath and fished his own Gummiphone out of his pocket. Kairi continued to sit in obedient silence as the silver-haired boy quickly lost his battle with his own lack of patience.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Riku: ALRIGHT LISTEN UP} \\
\text{Riku: EVERYONE SHUT THE HELL UP} \\
\text{Riku: I DON'T GIVE TWO SHITS ABOUT WHO HAS THAT PHONE} \\
\text{Riku: SOMEONE DOES AND THAT PHOTO IS OF THE DOOR TO LIGHT} \\
\text{Riku: SO} \\
\text{Riku: HERES WHAT WERE GONNA AND NO IM NOT LOOKING FOR FEEDBACK} \\
\text{Riku: THE DOOR TO LIGHT LEADS TO DESTINY ISLANDS AND THAT WHERE ME AND}
\end{align*}\]
KAIRI ARE RN
Riku: WHOEVER GOES THROUGH THAT DOOR IS GOING TO LAND HERE
Riku: ME AND KAIRI WILL INTERCEPT THEM IF ITS SORA GREAT IF ITS NOT SORA WE’LL BEAT THE EVERLOVING SHIT OUT OF THEM
Riku: SOMEONE ELSE TELL THE KING WE’VE HAD A RESPONSE FROM SORAS PHONE
Riku: SOMEONE ELSE TELL ANSEM WE MIGHT NEED HIS COMPUTER
Riku: WE’LL LET YOU KNOW WHAT WE FIND
Riku: CLEAR?

Luna_Diviner: Capslock.
Riku: CLEAR????????????
Luna_Diviner: Crystal.

He slammed his phone onto the table the two were hovering around, Kairi flinching with the sudden movement. Riku let out a long, drawn-out sigh as the tension in his shoulders finally released along with the torrent of commands he'd issued. In an ironic twist of fate, his attempt to alleviate the spiralling panic of his friends had inadvertently succeeded in calming the tornado that raged inside his own heart. Now that he had laid out a plan he felt significantly better; his control over the situation was now back in his hands.

"Do you remember when Sora and I came through the Door to Light and we were dumped into the ocean out by the island?" Riku questioned gruffly. Kairi nodded; the two had appeared as meteors in the sky and rocketed into the salty water. Good thing the two knew how to swim.

"If this guy is doing something similar, then the road he's walking will end in the same place. And whether it's Sora, or 'someone else', we'll be ready for them."

He looked back up at the redhead, the anger in his eyes now replaced with an ironclad determination. It was the same expression that Riku wore when he sacrificed himself to close the Door to Darkness from the other side, and again when he and Sora had resolved themselves to face Xemnas alone. It was the Riku that Kairi knew, the Riku who had darkness in his heart but was not consumed by it, the Riku who would willing throw himself into the jaws of a beast in the name of his friends. Kairi felt her own heart returning the sentiment, and she nodded firmly.

"Let's bring Sora home, together."

The plan had been to hop into a boat and row their way over to the island immediately. That plan didn't last long.

For one, the two knew from experience that time moved at varying speeds in the Realm of Darkness – the photo presented to them was clearly taken from the perspective of someone on the verge of stepping over the threshold between worlds, but if that time frame was accurate then the skies would already be set alight with the glow of the impending comet. Aqua had spent a whole ten years trapped within the depths of darkness, but for her it was barely more than a couple of weeks. It could be days before their target plummeted back into the Realm of Light ready to be apprehended by the two eagerly awaiting Keyblade wielders.

Secondly, the two were ashamed to admit they were… a little out of practice. Riku had continued to hone his abilities, sparring with Terra and Lea whenever he could pin the two down, but he knew that facing the same two opponents time and time again had made him a little rusty. Kairi hadn't even summoned Destiny's Embrace since her last sojourn to the Realm of Darkness, the weight of her Keyblade in her hand acting as a reminder of her failure to protect the one who had done the same for her countless times. Neither of them were particularly jonesing for a battle.
And thirdly, whether it was Sora or something… ’else’, whatever was going to be spat out by the Door to Light would be stranded on the island. Neither Riku or Kairi had found the strength of heart to return to the island since… well, just the sight of the Paopu tree and its curved trunk sent shivers down their collective spines. No boats had been docked there in over a month, so when their target inevitably washed up on the white sandy beach they would have no method of escape. Technically, they had all the time in the world.

Of course, they weren't malicious enough to make Sora wait overnight. They just ordered a Chinese takeaway and sat on the deck of their house, eyes to the sky looking for even the tiniest flash of light that would announce their friends arrival. The duo sat in comfortable silence, both understanding that the other was using their full attention on the task at hand, and pausing only to pick up the occasional wonton and munch down on it. Better to fight with a full stomach. Hopefully they wouldn't need it.

Their attentiveness wasn't necessary; the comet lit up the sky like a second sun.

Kairi had to physically cover her eyes with her arm as the meteor streaked through the night sky, appearing suddenly from behind a cloud and smashing into the ocean beyond the curved rock of the island. The blinding light left afterimages burned into her retinas as she blinked rapidly, trying to clear her vision. The night was already warm enough with the temperate climate, but the heat emitted by the comet was overpowering as if sitting in front of a fire pit. It was the same heat that accompanied the bright light that swept her out of the claws of death. It was Sora's light.

Kairi and Riku exchanged a firm look before throwing down their food and charging towards the pier. The two had already prepared a small boat, docked with a thick rope and large enough for four people. They were only planning on bringing three people back, including themselves, but they still had no idea what was waiting for them on the island. They were optimistic, but not stupid; pretending like there was no chance of conflict was no better than burying their heads in the sand.

Kairi hopped into the boat as Riku unhooked the rope from the dock. She took an oar in each hand as the silver-haired body leaped into the ship alongside her, the boat bobbing heavily in the water as the shock wave from the comet's impact finally reached the shore. The redhead began to lean into a rowing motion as the boat shifted away from the wooden pier, Riku eventually sitting beside her and taking one oar from her hand.

"You ready?" he asked, a rare genuine smile across his face and lighting up his eyes. Kairi returned the expression.

"More than ever."

It only took a few minutes for the duo to cross the water to the island, their rowing in sync the whole way as their muscle memory kicked back into gear. It had been far too long since the two had taken such a trip but their hearts still remembered the way. Kairi could feel her excitement blossoming in her chest as if her heart was about to burst. She could hardly believe that the day she had dreamed of was finally here, just waiting for her to reach out and seize it.

The boat slid up onto the sandy beach with a crunch as the wood ground against the sun-bleached sand. The redhead practically threw herself out of the boat and onto the beach, Riku shaking his head in mock exasperation as he collected the discarded oars and stored them in the boat for the trip back. Kairi scrambled to her feet, pulled her patent leather boots back up over her ankles, and charged across the sand as fast as her feet would carry her. The silhouette of the Paopu tree peeked over the hill like an old friend.

Her piercing blue eyes frantically scanned the beach, slowly adjusting to the low light of the moon that hung above her, searching for any sign of a washed-up figure. She could hear the crunching of sand behind her as Riku caught up, panting lightly with his shirt half hanging over the belt around his
waist. Sora must be absolutely freezing like this, no doubt soaked through with his wet entrance. The prospect of the comet containing anything other than their lost friend had completely slipped their minds, the two unwilling to accept anything less than success in their mission. There were so many people relying on them, there was no room for failure.

Kairi's eyes finally picked out movement from the water, a shadowy figure wading inland from the deep ocean and struggling to remain upright. Wet coughing filled the air as the figure attempted to vacate its lungs of brine and suck in life-giving air. She felt a tear dampen the corner of her eye at the sight, immediately darting down to the waterline and sloshing through the water towards the figure, the gentle rolling waves tickling her shins and soaking the ruffles on her dress. Against the icy moonlight the spikes of hair that drooped from the figure's head glimmered as the light reflected off the droplets caught in the strands, weighed down with water yet still defying gravity. There was only one person with an unruly mop of hair like that.

"SORA!" Kairi yelled, her voice echoing over the open and breaking the steady silence that hung over the island. "SORA! IS THAT YOU?!"

The figure didn't respond.

Kairi felt her legs slowing down in her approach, a sense of malaise sinking into her heart and extinguishing the brief burst of elation. The figure was now only waist-deep in the ocean and gaining, still hacking up water and hunched over with pain, each step slow and arduous. The grin that had wormed its way across her face slipped right off as she ground to a halt, finally standing still in the water that lapped around her shins. For some reason her heart was pounding in her chest as apprehension began to claw its way inside and consume any emotion other than fear.

"… Sora?"

The shadowy figure raised one hand and wiped its mouth, the raspy coughing finally subdued and its breathing steady.

"I know we have the same face, but give me a break."

Riku felt the air leave his lungs and a chill pass down his spine. He should've known they were too eager, too hopeful. The odds of Sora coming back to them unharmed were exceptionally slim, never mind returning at all. The being that stood in front of them and dangerously close to Kairi's frozen stance held Sora's silhouette, but carried itself with a hostile stance, shoulders raised and head low like an animal. Against the backdrop of the moon, the only feature that stood out were the piercing yellow eyes like headlights, a great evil lurking behind them, the same evil that had leered at them from behind the opaque visor of a scratched motorcycle helmet.

"Vanitas," he hissed through his teeth.

Vanitas let out a hoarse laugh and shook his head like a dog, droplets of water detangling from his hair and cascading around him like a halo. His identity became more obvious as he stalked up the shoreline, his muscular suit turned a deep maroon from the water saturated in the fibres and tattered skirt clinging to his thighs. No matter how much of a mirror image he and Sora were, the difference in stature and frame couldn't be obscured.

"I'm flattered you remember me!" he snarked, the glint in his yellow eyes like glowing fireflies. Riku sprinted down to Kairi's side and put one gloved hand on her shoulder, gently moving her backwards as the silver-haired Keyblade wielder placed himself between the two as a living barricade.

"Where's Sora?!" Riku demanded, his right fist clenching in preparation to summon his Keyblade.
Vanitas was outnumbered two to one, but he knew better than to take the demon lightly. Vanitas snorted in response.

"What am I, chopped liver?" he replied sarcastically, shrugging both shoulders and now only knee-deep in the salty water. "He's riigliight here."

He pointed at his chest his one hand, right where the red stripes converged over his half-heart. Riku growled in frustration, teeth bared as Vanitas' mocking tone made the anger in his heart swell.

"Don't play games with me!" he yelled, his voice boomed over the crashing waves and the sloshing of Vanitas' legs through the water. "It was supposed to be Sora! What did you do to him?!"

"Wait!" Kairi gasped, the unbridled rage in Riku's voice startling her out of her stupor. "Vanitas, were you the one sending us those messages?"

Vanitas gave her a confused look, head cocked to one side. For a moment she could almost see Sora staring right back at her with that same expression, but the mirage vanished as soon as she blinked. The black-haired boy dug around in his pocket for a moment before producing something and holding it up for the duo to see.

"You mean, with this thing?"

Riku was not particularly well known for being a level-headed individual, but the fury that engulfed his heart seeing that damaged Gummiphone clutched in the traitorous hand of the Sora lookalike made his vision go red. Not only had Vanitas sent the remaining Guardians of Light on a wild goose chase by posing as their lost friend, but who knows what he had done to Sora to steal that phone from him? Riku couldn't comprehend the thought of telling the others that it was a false alarm. How many months would they need to wait before the brunet finally came back to them?!

Braveheart practically forced its way into his hand, just as enraged as its master and vibrating with power. Riku bellowed with rage, steam coming out of his ears and lunged himself at Vanitas with his Keyblade pointed like a rapier. Vanitas yelped and quickly jumped backwards, almost losing his footing and toppling into the ocean, the blunt edge of Riku's Keyblade narrowly skimming the skin on his face as it almost pierced the spot right between his eyeballs. Any slower and that blow would've killed him.

"Oi!" Vanitas exclaimed. "What's your problem?!"

Riku was done talking. Not gracing the black-haired boy with an answer, he swiped down with his Keyblade intending on cutting Vanitas straight in half, but for all the raven Keyblade wielder's battle-sense was a little rusty after such a long time exiled to the Realm of Darkness he was still able to reflexively dodge to the side. Any deeper into the ocean and he wouldn't be able to keep his footing, and Riku was out for blood. Kairi called his name in shock at his sudden show of aggression, but the Gummiphone that still remained clenched in Vanitas' hand was the only thing his mind could focus on.

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Vanitas snorted and summoned the Void Gear, pocketing the phone so he could give his opponent all his attention. He knew he wasn't exactly in the best standing with the Guardians of Light, what with the whole 'trying to murder them to form the χ-blade' thing, but he had hoped he'd be able to get out more than four sentences out before they tried to maim him. Well, if that's how Riku wanted to play, then he was more than willing to oblige. His own bloodlust was rising, a vicious grin crossing his face; he had forgotten just how good it felt to face someone on equal standing.

"Is this how the 'Guardians of Light' fight now?" he sneered. "Do you need me to be knee-deep in
water to even stand a chance? Pathetic."

Riku's cyan eyes seemed to glow in the pale light of the moon like search lights. Vanitas' goading only sent him deeper into his fury, swinging his Keyblade to slice his head clean off but deflected by the Void Gear now that Vanitas was prepared for the attack. The two exchanged blows, both equally matched and neither able to get a hit in as if they were fighting clones of each other. For some reason the Void Gear felt oddly heavy and uncomfortable in his hand, and Vanitas noticed himself getting tired very quickly. Strange, he shouldn't be that out of shape if he had only been gone for a few days...

Realising quickly that the silver-haired Keyblade wielder would easily overpower him if their brawl was allowed to continue for much longer, Vanitas squatted and ducked right underneath Riku's Keyblade and punched him square in the stomach. Riku let out a harsh rasp as the air was forced out of his lungs, breaking his chain of attacks and sending him staggering backwards.

"You're fighting dirty now?!!" he demanded, refusing to fall to his knees and powering through the pain.

"Is it really that surprising? Did you forget who you're fighting?" Vanitas retorted, using the lull in combat to prepare a swing of his own now that the other boy's guard had been let down.

Stop it! I don't want to fight him!

Vanitas' muscles suddenly locked up as if something had wrapped itself around his raised Keyblade arm, holding him back and preventing him from carrying through with the blow. He could almost feel a set of icy-cold fingers embraced around his own, sharing his hold on the Void Gear's hilt and fighting against him. Riku used the opportunity to marry his Keyblade with Vanitas' face, Braveheart clanging against the metal frame that protected his chin and reverberating through his head with the impact. His composure now returned to him, the grey-haired Keyblade wielder smashed his free left hand into the rolling water that licked around his feet.

"WATERA!"

His magic surged down his arm and into the waiting water, spreading out and forming a huge spout that promptly gushed into Vanitas and knocked him off his feet. The force sent him flying up the sand until he was out of reach of the waves, the Void Gear clattering against the rocks as it was yanked out of his hand by the impact. Vanitas had just about enough of water for one day. Brushing sand out of his eyes as it clung to the wet strands of his hair, he saw Riku charging towards him like a raging bull, ready to impale him.

Glancing at his disarmed Keyblade and noting with dread that it was too far for him to reach before the silver-haired Keyblade wielder sunk his weapon in between his ribs, Vanitas had no choice but to reach out with his heart and summon the Void Gear back into his hand. Clenching his eyes shut so the bright burst of light that accompanied his Keyblade didn't blind him, Vanitas brought it in front of himself to block the inevitable blow as Rikus approach hastened. In his panic he didn't notice that the Keyblade felt oddly lightweight in his hand, or how the cold metal hilt seemed unusually soft like worn leather.

The blow never came.

Peeking one eye open, just in case the lack of impact was because he had died so quickly that he didn't feel it, the only sight that met his gaze was that of Riku staggering backwards with a look on his face like he had seen a ghost, all traces of anger lost as his cyan eyes drowned in fear. It really wasn't an expression that suited his features. Vanitas didn't care what had drawn such a reaction of
his opponent - it was a chance to fight back before he was overpowered again. He pulled himself to his feet and raised the Void Gear above his head like a cobra ready to strike.

*Sora keeled over as a brutal stab of pain tore its way through his chest and mournful wailing filled his head. He fell to his knees in front of Riku, clutching at his heart as if it would burst through his ribcage. He heard the cries of worry from Donald and Goofy, but the pain almost drowned them out. Riku simply laughed at the sight of his downed friend, watching his bravado fade as the brunette crumbled before him.*

"Don't you see yet?" Riku sneered, descending the steps and clutching the Keyblade of Heart in his right hand. "'The princess' heart is responding. It's been there all along. Kairi's heart rests within you!"

Maniacal joy distorted his best friend's features as he effortlessly swatted Donald and Goofy aside like flies. Sora so desperately wanted to pull himself to his feet, to fight like he had fought a million times before, but his legs had no strength left in them. Riku finally reached his target, a dark hunger in his cyan eyes, and raised his Keyblade above his head to strike Sora down where he lay.

"So, I shall release you now, Princess. Complete the Keyhole with your power. Open the door, lead me into everlasting darkness!"

Sora felt something inside of him move. Something gripped his arms and legs like he was a puppet on strings and pulled him to his feet, the Kingdom Key leaping into his hand with just as much enthusiasm as Sora himself. He brought the Keyblade up, using both hands to grip the spine and blocked Riku's attack. His knees wanted to buckle under his weight, but the brunette felt the strength of two other people holding him up. Kairi called for him with her all heart, but the second boy with blonde hair and ocean blue eyes gave him the power to fight back against his friend.

"Forget it!" he grimaced, his sudden surge of strength deflecting this blow and forcing Riku back.

"There's no way you're taking Kairi's heart!"

The only thought that Sora's brain was capable of producing was that it *hurt. GOD, it hurt.* He let out a pained yelp and clutched one hand to his head, feeling waves of nausea rush through his body as if his eyes were about to pop out of his skull. He tried to keep his eyes open, wary of being attacked while he was defenceless, but the flashing lights that clouded his vision made it difficult to see. His stomach churned, but there was nothing inside it.

Kairi's Keyblade crossed his vision out of nowhere, the flower teeth hooking over the shaft of his own blade and twisting around until the motion forced the Keyblade out of Sora's grasp, disarming him in one smooth motion. The furious redhead finished off with a round-house kick to the stomach, unceremoniously ploughing the black-haired boy into the sand before he could retaliate. This was promptly followed by a sweep that hooked Destiny's Embrace under Riku's legs and knocked him off his feet. She had ended the brawl in a single solid motion.

"Stop it, both of you!" she yelled at the two downed Keyblade wielders, her voice cracking with barely restrained emotion. "This is completely ridiculous!"
"But Kairi, that Keybla-" Riku tried to explain himself only to be met with Destiny's Embrace pointed inches from his face.

"Especially you!" the redhead yelled. "I want to know what's going on just as much as you do, but I refuse to come all this way just to destroy the only lead we've gotten so far! You're better than this, Riku!"

Riku opened his mouth to protest, but closed it silently at the stern look on Kairi's face. The redhead had apparently learned her imposing glare from Aerith. He averted his gaze and punched a closed fist into the sand below him in frustration.

"And you," she growled, spinning around and jabbing the curved metal flowers on her Keyblade at the downed black-haired boy. "You had better start talking, and fast."

Sora just blinked at her, the pounding in his head not completely subsided after the assault he had endured at the hands of his two best friends. He tore his vision away from Kairi's Keyblade to look down and see the Kingdom Key nestled in the soft sand at his knees, having been wrenched from Vanitas' grasp by the redhead, and turned to see the Void Gear still laying abandoned several feet away. He had felt Vanitas call out to his own Keyblade for assistance, so why had the Kingdom Key responded instead?

Annoyed at the lack of response from the raven boy, Kairi stabbed her Keyblade forward another couple of inches to remind him that he was at her mercy. Sora flinched and pulled backwards away from the weapon, sitting back on his heels in the sand with both hands in the air.

"Whoa whoa, hey, give me a break Kairi!"

Kairi refused to allow her guard to be let down that easily; she had witnessed the brutal malice that hid behind those piercing yellow eyes personally, betraying just how much Vanitas enjoyed manipulating those around him. It might be incredibly out of character for the demon to be taking such a defensive position, especially after he had so aggressively fought with Riku, but it was probably just yet another one of his ruses. Even if the shockingly innocent look in his eyes reminded her of someone she knew...

"I'm no fool, Vanitas," she warned him, a deep darkness in her voice that sent shivers down Sora's spine. "Sora destroyed you months ago. You're going to explain how you're still alive, and what you're doing with his Keyblade. Now."

"... Vanitas...?" Sora questioned, head cocked to one side. "But Kairi, I'm-"

His yellow eyes widened with shock as he looked down at his body, seeing the contoured black and red suit caked with a layer of sand that covered his body from the neck down. That's right, they thought he was Vanitas. Well, he supposed he technically was Vanitas at that moment. That would explain why the Kingdom Key had answered his twin's call. His own cries for help must've drowned out Vanitas' in the heat of the moment, fighting for his life against his best friend...

Wait, did she say months?!

Kairi expected the worst when Vanitas suddenly jumped to his feet and readied her Keyblade for a surprise attack, only to freeze as his muscular arms wrapped themselves around her shoulders like a vice. Was he... hugging her?! His spiky black hair poked her in the face and threatened to take an eye out, metal chin piece digging into her shoulder as he embraced her tightly, clinging on for dear life.
That wasn't exactly the reaction she had been expecting.

"youguysimissedyousomuchitsbeensolongohmygod-" Sora cried without taking a breath, each word tightening his grip on the redhead as if she would fade from his arms at any moment.

Kairi remained completely frozen on the spot, Keyblade still in hand and eyes wide as he continued on his ecstatic ranting. Her eyes flicked over to Riku who was watching in bewilderment at the display; he simply shrugged his shoulders in equal confusion. She was relieved that the fruitless fighting had been brought to a close before someone was badly hurt, but she wasn't sure if this reaction was any better.

What exactly was going on?!

Ventus didn't consider himself to be an angry person, but he'd been unable to shake the storm clouds above his head since Sora had gone missing.

The yelling had started a couple of weeks ago. Out of all the connections that Sora held with those that had shared his heart, Ventus was probably the luckiest, although the definition of 'lucky' was pretty debatable. The series of events that tied the five of them together were less than ideal, but out of all of them Ven's heart was the least bound to Sora's. Heck, the other three literally wouldn't even have existed if it wasn't for the brunette! That was something that the blonde was still trying to wrap his head around; the world was a lot more complicated now that he was awake and in his own body again.

The thought that he was now significantly older than the others due to his decade-long coma was one that he still hadn't mentally addressed.

He knew he wasn't the first to experience it - the begging and pleading with flashes of sapphire eyes staring back at him in his sleep - but he was the first to report it. The blonde still remembered the look of pity in Aqua's eyes as she consoled him, silently absorbing his fervoured rant about how Sora was calling out for help and they needed to do something! Anything! She patted his head in that motherly way she always did and told him it was probably just a dream. They all missed Sora deeply: perhaps it was just wishful thinking. Ventus pouted, upset at the hand-wavy explanation that she offered, but relented. Aqua was always right. Maybe he was just so desperate for a sign of their missing friend that he was misinterpreting the slightest whiff of a lead, even if it made no sense.

Ventus huffed in frustration and fished his Gummiphone out of his pocket for what must have been the millionth time that day, the mini Wayfinder charm that Aqua had made for their trio reflecting the glorious sunlight that shone down and warmed his back. Still no new messages. Every minute that went by with no update on the situation was pure agony.

He flicked over to the other group chat he had set up shortly after Sora had disappeared. Ventus wasn't cruel enough to rank his friends, especially now that he had so many of them, but the connection shared between himself and the other pieces of Sora's heart was a little different. Even if the other Guardians had disregarded their collective accounts of Sora appearing in their dreams, they found solace in the knowledge that there were others who believed them. Ventus wished that they could've become friends under better circumstances, but he wasn't in a position to complain.

10_year_nap: im gonna die if we dnt hear nything soon (ﾉಠ益ಠ)ﾉ≡ﾚ
notanobody: ikr, xion had 2 go step out 4 a bit she was freaking out pretty hard
number_imaginary: hhhhhhh
number_imaginary: im
number_imaginary: F I N E
He sheathed his Gummiphone and returned his attention to his training. The Land of Departure was so eerily quiet these days - Aqua was taking her role as Keyblade Master more seriously and Terra spent a lot of time training with Riku. The halls that were once filled with a symphony of laughter and sparring now rung with deafening silence. It was sad to see his home rot under layers of dust with no one left to care for it. Especially now that Master Eraqus was gone.

Eraquas.

Ventus didn't want to think about the grave that still lay under the tree, the Keyblade buried in the dirt in memoriam of the master that had left it behind. The blonde refused to allow his home to fall into obscurity, so even as the visits from his friends became fewer and further apart, he still found the time to stop in. He was sick of pacing the halls on his own waiting for any kind of response from the Destiny Islands duo- ahem, trio, so was passing his time training with the apparatus by the Mountain Path. It was enough to take his mind away from the situation, at least.

The air filled with the sound of squeaking as each blow from his Keyblade spun the apparatus on its axis, the target wheels rotating through the air like disco balls and scattering sunlight off their golden embellished surfaces. Wayward Wind struck each ring with increasing speed, held in Ventus' right hand and colliding with the metal targets with a dull clang. He knew the others thought his style of wielding backwards was awkward, even requiring a specialised Keyblade with a hilt designed for such a use, but the blonde was determined to prove them all wrong. Even Sora was known to use Keyblades backhanded occasionally, and no one questioned him!

Ventus felt like he owed more to Sora than he would ever be able to pay back. He knew what the brunette would say to that: 'you don't owe me anything, I chose to help you on my own, you've already done enough!' He would swear that his little brother was deathly allergic to accepting help even when it was freely offered. Even after spending ten years taped to each other, the blonde knew practically nothing about the boy that had sacrificed his own heart for a stranger, and that moment could be lost to the unfeeling clutches of death forever. Ventus had his chance to save Sora, and he gave it up the day he stopped searching for him.

His reverie was broken with the sound of metal snapping as a wheel was flung off its arm and sent flying across the training ground. Ventus was so wrapped up in his guilt that he had struck the wheel hard enough to sever the metal chain.

Whoops.

Maybe it was a good thing Master Eraqus wasn't still around to berate him breaking the equipment again...

Ventus shook his head and dismissed his Keyblade. Aqua had lectured him on not bottling up his emotions, but he was so angry at himself for being unable to do more for the boy that was literally responsible for his continued existence. He would've perished alone on that beach that Xehanort dumped him on, wrapped like a corpse in a silk white cloth on the trunk of the Paopu tree, had Sora not reached out to him. He was barely a newborn baby and still willing to offer his own heart to save a person he had never met before. How anyone still doubted the insurmountable strength of Sora’s heart was beyond him.
With a light that shone so bright that it was able to pluck his own heart out of the darkness, what was to say that he hadn't survived through the last three months? It was an idea that he still clung to; he wouldn't allow himself to consider any other possibility. He couldn't consider it.

Sighing to himself, he fished his Gummiphone out of his pocket once more. Ventus wondered if he was being a little obsessive with his constant paranoia, but he would never forgive himself if he missed the return of his little brother because he was trashing the training grounds. His sky blue eyes widened at the notification of the missed messages from 'sweet_memories'. Kairi. Was it an update?!

Finally?!

sweet_memories: ok everyone, this is kinda not what we were expecting
Riku: THATS PUTTING IT LIGHTLY
sweet_memories: so, we're all ok but theres no way to talk about this over messenger
sweet_memories: we thiiiiiink sora's ok? its kinda hard to say right now
soHotImOnFire: uhhhhh what exactly does that mean?
sweet_memories: look, everyone who's interested head over to yen sid's tower, we'll explain everything there, you really need to hear this in person
Luna_Diviner: Lea and I are with the other apprentices, we'll stay here so we can relay the info over to them.
soHotImOnFire: um excuse u i will absolutely not stay here!
sweet_memories: please just trust me on this one
soHotImOnFire: ... 
soHotImOnFire: fine but im NOT happy about this

Ventus just felt even more conflicted than before! Was Sora alright or not?! He loved his friends dearly but they were so cryptic all the time, it was like talking to Master Eraqus. He nervously chewed his bottom lip and thumbed out a reply.

10_year_nap: at least tell us if soras ok? Σ(°д°;)
notanobody: thats messed up leaving us hanging like that
10_year_nap: pls kairi were dying here
sweet_memories: sorry guys, but you'll understand when you all get here
aoSora: im fine dnt worry bout me, just tired nd hungry
aoSora: theyre tryin 2 feed me their leftover chinese food
aoSora: im not fine im being held under duress send help my address is 123 ligma street
Riku: NOT HELPING
aoSora: lmao

Ventus knew that Naminé was right, that the manner of speech coming from Sora's messages was so out-of-character for the brunette that it was jarring, but the contrasting statements did nothing to put his mind at ease. Something heavy sat in the seat of his stomach like a rock, the feeling of impending doom refusing to shift. Spending ten years in a coma had beaten some of the child-like naivety out of him, and he was a lot less willing to assume the best out of a situation.

still_not_a_keyblade_master: ven
still_not_a_keyblade_master: you ok?

Ventus blinked, his attention so focused on the conversation that he almost missed the direct message sent from Terra. Even with the pit in his stomach growing with each heartbeat he couldn't help but smile. Some days it was so difficult to track his fellow apprentices down that he wasn't convinced they weren't leaving him behind, just like they had done when Xehanort first disappeared over ten years ago. The reminder that his friends still thought about him was enough to send rays of light peeking through the clouds in his mind.
10_year_nap: I dnt even no how 2 feel rn (´﹏´`
10_year_nap: im gonna use my glider, i can b at the tower in like 10 mins tops
still_not_a_keyblade_master: want us to come with you?

Ventus considered the offer for a moment. He really didn't like having to rely so heavily on his more experienced friends for everything, but they were just as much a part of Sora's life as he was. Well, that wasn't even remotely true, but they were still his friends. Ventus didn't think there was a single person among their friendship group that didn't owe Sora their life in one way or another.

10_year_nap: yes pls
still_not_a_keyblade_master: meet you at the entrance to the tower
still_not_a_keyblade_master: pls dont crash your glider this time
10_year_nap: it was ONE TIME (≧ロ≦)

Ventus snorted to himself at the frankly egregious claims made by his friend and picked up the discarded target wheel. Master Eraqus might not be roaming the halls with a ruler in one hand ready to dole out punishment for leaving the place looking like a trash pile, but the blonde felt wrong just leaving it in ruins. He slid it up to the apparatus and rested it against the hollow metal trunk - there would be time to fix it later.

Eyeing up his attempt at cleaning and deciding it would have to do, he moved to brush his hand against his pauldron, the seal that held the magic for his Glider and Armour. Cid had been promising to make more pauldrons for the other Keyblade wielders but there was only so much Orichalcum to harvest, and the Bulky Vendors weren't as common as they used to be, so no more grinding for materials. Ventus was interrupted by one last vibration from his pocket, yet another message on his Gummiphone trickling through. He considered leaving it and giving his priority to Sora, but it could be another update.

He begrudgingly unlocked his phone and checked the message. It was an image accompanied by a line of text, sent to the entire group chat from whoever, or whatever, was using Sora's username. It was a slightly blurry photo as if the lens had been damaged by something, but the spindly tower adorned with moons and stars was unmistakable. Most interesting was the boy posing in front of the tower as if he was taking a selfie, someone that Ventus would've sworn was Sora until he looked closer and noticed the jet-black hair and those familiar piercing yellow eyes.

aoSora: cum 2 creppy wizard tower in 30mins if u want an ass kicking

Oh.

Oh no.

Oh no.

Master_Aqua: I'm going to ram my Keyblade so far up your ass you'll be tasting metal for weeks.
aoSora: fckn do it then cum at me scrublord im ripped
aoSora: srsly guys pls dnt actually fight him hes not in a gd state right now
Master_Aqua: I'm going to decapitate you and mount your head on my wall.
soHotImOnFire: jesus christ aqua
aoSora: consider this, im a creature of pure darkness when im done with u the only way 2 recognise u will b with ur dental records
aoSora: vanitas says hes very sorry and pls dont kill him
aoSora: u cudnt file ur way out of a paper bag
aoSora: again, very sorry
Ventus had read and reread the exchange more times than he could count. He half expected to see a bald patch emerge beneath his feet, the grass worn away from how much he'd been pacing back and forth, watching the neon train whiz past but never stop at the station with passengers on board. It barely took any time at all to jet over to the Mysterious Tower, part of him wanting to just kick down the front door and confront the residents inside before he could talk himself out of this. Whether Ventus was actually living the worst-case scenario or he was just the subject of a cruel prank, the blonde wouldn't be satisfied until he saw it for himself.

Ventus still remembered the moment he and Sora defeated Vanitas at the Keyblade Graveyard; the memory was imprinted into his brain like a Polaroid. The two halves of his heart had never seen eye to eye, to put it lightly, but it was perhaps the only time that Vanitas and himself had been in complete agreement, even without words. Ventus had always considered his 'brother' to be a savage brute, revelling in violence and drawing joy from manipulating those around him. It really only made sense for the raven Keyblade wielder to side with the Seekers of Darkness – he and Xehanort had more in common that Vanitas was willing to admit.

But when his Keyblade sliced through his chest for the final time that day, the look in Vanitas' eyes held nothing of his usual viciousness. It was a look of exhaustion and acceptance – Vanitas would never be able to overcome the light that cast his shadow. Just the same, Ventus could never quell the tide of darkness. Even as Sora protested, the two laid down their weapons against each other, and Vanitas had faded away. The blonde had hoped that his newly-discovered acceptance of the darkness in his heart would allow Vanitas to return to his rightful place, so that the two could be whole again after more than ten excruciating years.

So why was Vanitas still around? And why on Earth were Kairi and Riku not more upset by this?!

His internal rant was cut short as two shooting stars jetted overheard before turning back around and approaching the small garden at the base of the tower. Ventus quickly pocketed his Gummiphone and jogged forward to greet the new arrivals. Both figures were clad in armour and riding aboard Gliders, but allowed their suits to revert when they came into contact with solid ground. Aqua and Terra carried sombre expressions, which momentarily lifted as they spotted the blonde waiting for them.

"How are you holding up, Ven?" Terra asked, ruffling his messy blonde hair. Ventus jovially batted his hand away.

"A little better," he replied, the heaviness in his heart a lot more bearable now that he had his friends to back him up. "Aqua?"

Neither Ventus nor Terra had missed the tension that seemed to grip every inch of Aqua's body, her arms folded and indigo eyes dark with a rage that Ventus had never witnessed before. She sighed and uncrossed her arms under the scrutinising gaze of her fellow apprentices, her displeased expression not breaking for a single moment.

"I'll be better when we find out what's happening," she remarked, deadpan and controlled. "I don't like how secretive Riku and Kairi are being about this. They'd better have a good reason to try and protect Vanitas from us."

Ventus winced at how Aqua spat the name of his brother. All three of them had their fair share of run-ins with the raven Keyblade wielder before, but Aqua was the one to fight Vanitas when the two fused and he took control of their shared body. The blonde had never found out what occurred while the two battled internally, eventually resulting in the collapsing of the half-formed χ-blade, and neither Terra nor Aqua would go into much detail regarding their sides of the story. Some things were better left forgotten, but the blunette still held a vicious grudge against the one she blamed for
Ventus' demise.

Ventus looked down at his feet meekly, clenched and unclenched his fists, then looked back up at his waiting friends with a look of unflinching determination.

"I want you both to promise me that you won't try to kill Vanitas," he demanded, brows furrowed.

"... Why?" Terra questioned, thoroughly befuddled by the odd request. Surely Ventus had the most right to be angry out of all of them?

"Because," he replied, "When Sora and I defeated Vanitas together, Sora tried to convince him to stay. He wanted Vanitas to have another chance, so he could be his own person. And if Sora wanted that, then... then so do I."

Aqua and Terra exchanged a look that Ventus couldn't place, but for all Aqua's gloomy expression remained firmly planted on her face, Terra's eyes creased with a small smile. Ventus really had come a long way: he still remembered when the blonde would beg the two older Keyblade wielders to train with him because he felt like he was weaker than them. Maybe a little bit of Sora's cockiness had rubbed off on him after all. Terra turned back to Ventus and held out his pinky finger.

"All right then," he agreed. "I guess if Vanitas had done anything untoward to Sora, Riku would've already murdered him by now."

Ventus broke out into a huge smile and joined his pinky with Terra's in a seal of promise. The two then gave Aqua a shared stare, noting that she had remained silent the entire time. It was obvious that the two weren't going to let the blunette dodge Ventus' promise no matter how hard she tried. She huffed, letting her own smile cross her face at the affectionate display between the two boys, and linked her pinky with theirs.

"Since when did you get so serious?" she asked, only half joking. "I promise that I won't lay a finger on Vanitas..."

Ventus opened his mouth to say something, but Aqua held up her free hand to shush him.

"... Unless he did something to Sora. Agreed?"

Ventus considered complaining that Aqua hadn't fully agreed to his request, but figured that her terms were reasonable. At least, more reasonable than what she was threatening to do to Vanitas a couple of minutes ago. He nodded, his blonde spikes gently waving in the wind, and the three untwined their fingers. Ventus wasn't sure when the trio had started spending less time with each other, but the elation that should've accompanied their reunion was tainted with anxiety. They still had to face whatever was waiting for them in that tower.

You would think that after ten years, Yen Sid would've installed an elevator.

Perhaps Ventus wasn't in as good physical condition as he used to be, especially after spending a decade in a coma. He had to practically crawl up the last couple flights of stairs. Terra did offer a piggyback, but he was a big boy and didn't need help! His friends almost believed him. The other
thing that kept him motivated were the sounds of conversation that echoed down from the rafters, the words unintelligible but the owners of the voices undeniable. Final reaching the top of the stairs, Ventus darted ahead of the others and practically kicked down the door in his haste to see what awaited him on the other side.

Vanitas fully threw himself off the table he had been sitting on in fright, straight into Kairi who ended up flattened on the floor beneath the startled Keyblade wielder. Riku and Yen Sid barely flinched, the latter of which was nose deep in a book lined with gold thread and glistening as if it was alive.

"Was that completely necessary," Yen Sid asked, clearly not expecting an actual answer. Ventus winced as the door banged against the wall with the force he had hit it with.

"Sorry…" he muttered, rubbing the back of his head in shame. Aqua almost collided with the bashful blonde as she chased him up the stairs.

"Where is he," she demanded, almost forgetting her promise to not lop Vanitas' head off as soon as he laid her eyes on him. The boy in question had just about picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself off, resisting the urge to offer a hand to Kairi. She had attacked and disarmed him, after all. Once he spotted the intruders, his expression quickly soured into one of disdain.

"Not you lot again," he groaned. "The angst-brigade already has more than enough members."

"Are we counting you in that?" Kairi asked, crossing her arms and frowning at being left on the floor. Vanitas opened his mouth to protest, then wordlessly closed it in defeat. Guess he couldn't argue with that.

"Wait, so is Sora with you guys?" Ventus queried, his concern evident on his face as his mind drew back to the reason for their visit. His eyes darted around the room for the sight of brown hair and blue eyes, his apprehension growing. Riku and Kairi exchanged identical looks of worry, the expression unfamiliar to the silver-haired boys face.

"I'm… not sure how to answer that," Vanitas admitted.

Ventus felt his heart sink a little. He had suspected as much, but there was still a part of him that clung to the hope of his little brother returning home safely. All those nights being awoken from sleep by the brunette’s cries for help were upsetting, but they were also a lifeline, a sign that he was hanging on somewhere and hadn't forgotten them. The blonde reached into his pocket and produced an ice cream bar, wrapped in pastel blue packaging but soft to the touch as the insides had slowly melted in the trip over from the Land of Departure.

"I brought this for him," he said forlornly. "Sora and I never got to eat it together before he…"

Ventus shook his head; even after all these months it was still hard to speak about what had occurred on the island that night. Considering that the two had spent the better part of a decade literally glued together, the blonde still knew next to nothing about the boy who had saved his life. There was so much lost time to make up for, so many missed experiences that they would never get back. It seemed like every time the two brothers crossed paths one of them was wrenched away by the cruel hands of fate.

"Here," he stated, breaking his own reverie and holding the treat out to Vanitas. "You never got to try this either. It's sort of a tradition of ours!"

Vanitas reluctantly accepted the gift, eyeing it up suspiciously as if he'd just been handed a brick of
poison. Whatever it was, he could feel the chill radiating from under the plastic packaging even through his thick leather gloves. He cautiously unwrapped the item as the scent of sugar wafted to his nostrils and turned his stomach a little. Vanitas was never one for food in general – he didn't need to eat to live and it just weighed his stomach down – and the syrupy odour exuding from the bar was not changing his mind.

"What is it?" he probed, sticking his tongue out and tentatively brushing the surface with the tip.

"Sea salt ice cream!" Ventus replied excitedly, ready to spread the good word of his favourite dessert. "It's the speciality of Radiant Garden and Twilight Town! Although, I guess you've never been to either of those places, huh…"

Vanitas mulled over the flavour for a moment as it hit his taste buds. He could definitely see where the treat got its name from – the solid bar of sugar was offset by a salty undertone that prevented it from becoming too sickly. It wasn't really something he would eat willingly, but he could imagine Sora wolfing these down by the bucket-full.

"It's salty…" Sora mused, "…but sweet! Oh man, it's been ages since I had one of these!"

The remainder of the ice cream near enough vanished in a single bite, the first piece of food to pass Sora's lips since he disappeared. It wasn't as filling as any of Little Chef's creations, but he hadn't realised just how starved he was until the treat was handed to him. Considering that he had existed as nothing more substantial than a floating heart for a significant portion of that time, it wasn't all that surprising. The brunette couldn't imagine an existence so devoid of all the pleasures that came along with a flavoursome plate of food.

"Hey, slow down, you'll choke," Riku stated, his expression deadpan as Sora inhaled the ice cream. He snorted in amusement and decidedly ignored the request to control himself.

"Sure, Dad," he retorted. Riku allowed a rare smile to cross his face and simply shook his head. He knew better than to try and convince Sora to show a modicum of self-control around anything with a high sugar content. The brunette – could he really consider himself a brunette any more? – went to devour the rest of the ice cream but found a hand on either cheek, clasping his face between them and pulling his eyes back to their owner.

Aqua stared into his glowing yellow eyes, scouring them as if searching for something hidden in their inky depths. The grip on his face meant he was unable to turn away, as she looked for a hint of recognition in those golden pools. For a moment she looked suspicious, as if she was examining a bomb ready to explode, but even within those evil eyes she could see a flicker of innocence that could only belong to one person.

"… Sora?"

Aqua watched as Vanitas blinked slowly at her in response, a glazed-over look crossing his face for a split second, before the child-like wonderment crumbled to reveal the usual cynical expression that his features usually bore. He wriggled in his seat and slapped her hands away from his face with a disgruntled scowl.

"Hands off the merchandise."

Aqua flinched and quickly withdrew her hands as if she'd received an electric shock. Vanitas looked at the half-eaten ice cream bar still in his hand and grimaced, even the tiny trickle of sustenance sitting in his belly like a rock; it was such a foreign feeling to him and not one he planned on getting comfortable with. The look of abject horror in Aqua's glistening eyes only continued to grow,
reflected on the faces of Terra and Ventus who were privy to the whole debacle. She took a couple steps backwards, and wordlessly looked to the observing Riku and Kairi for an explanation for what just occurred.

"Well," Riku huffed, "There's your answer. Now you know what happened to Sora."
Chapter Summary

Stuff starts to get really juicy in this chapter! We finally learn more about where this story is heading in the future, plus I still managed to fit some memes in here and there. Basically, everyone is suffering. The end. See ya next week!

Also AO3 ate all my formatting for breakfast, so if you see any random word spacing then pls let me know.

So many people were lining up to have a turn at kicking Vanitas’ ass, he was considering charging for admission.

He wasn’t sure if it was a trait unique to blondes, or if it was something that the people holding fragments of Sora’s heart had in common, but Ventus’ look-alike burst through the hefty doors of Yen Sid’s study in the exact same manner as his doppelganger and loudly declared that he was going to “murder that asshole where he stood”. For a so-called ‘Guardian of Light’ some of them had violent tendencies that went far beyond Xehanort and his eleven clones, not counting himself of course. Vanitas was barely able to open his mouth without someone trying to stick their fist in it. Sure, he used to be their sworn enemy, and maybe he had tried to kill them that one time…. Fine, more than once. They super deserved it, though.

He couldn’t blame them completely for their less than welcoming reception. If Sora had turned up at the doorstep of the Seekers of Darkness begging for help after killing off half their members, he would’ve had a knife stabbed in his back like it was the Ides of March. Perhaps their hostility was spurred by their expectations that Riku and Kairi would be victorious at dragging the brunette home by his hair, so accepting anything less was nothing short of a total failure. Perhaps it was because Vanitas looked so similar to Sora that just gazing upon his face reminded them of the friend they had abandoned in the darkness.

He was still a little pissed off at that. Vanitas expected nothing less than to be forgotten in the Realm of Darkness, but these people claimed to be Sora’s friends. Vanitas didn’t know what having friend was like, but the constant lectures on the POWER OF FRIENDSHIP™ had given him a rough idea. Sora should be thanking him for fighting everyone who came through that door on his behalf. Every single person deserved his boot up their ass.

Considering that Ventus and Roxas were even more identical than Vanitas and Sora, something he hadn’t believed was even possible until he saw it for himself, they should really be used to that by now. Funnily enough, the differences between the two blondes reflected the differences between himself and his little brother – one was kind and warm like a ray of sunshine on a gloomy day. The other was sharp and dangerous, like a poisoned blade.

Either way, it was amusing until he was the target of their aggressions. Vanitas had to dodge a Keyblade thrown straight at his head, leaving it embedded in the wall behind him. Yikes.

Perhaps agreeing to be dragged along by Riku and Kairi was not the smartest move. With Xehanort’s whereabouts still unknown to him, Sora’s dim-witted friends were the last safe port in a
raging storm, but if they had their way Vanitas would be sent packing back to the Realm of Darkness before he could call parlay. The raven boy wanted to evict Sora from his heart more than anyone else in the room, so bit his tongue as the Guardians physically restrained Roxas before he actually killed someone. He would play along, if only for now. There was nothing stopping him from getting out of dodge once the brunette had been pried from him; he was in the Realm of Light now, and that gave him plenty of options for causing havoc.

“So,” Vanitas began, “I’m guessing by the circus you’ve got going on here that Xehanort’s plan didn’t work out?”

“No.” Roxas replied with his arms crossed, still fuming that his friends had prevented him from getting sweet revenge. “We kicked his ass three months ago, same day we kicked your ass.”

For all the response was loaded with hostility, it did at least answer a question that had been plaguing Vanitas since the whole debacle started. It was no wonder he was struggling to use the Void Gear, or that he was exhausting himself so quickly – he was three months out of shape! He swore that his time in the Realm of Darkness was maybe a week tops, although considering that the sun never rose and the moon was technically just a giant blue heart, he wasn’t too surprised that his sense of time was a little skewed.

“Speaking of that,” Terra interjected, a little more controlled than the seething blonde, “You never explained what happened to you. Sora and Ventus both took care of you…”

“Beats me,” Vanitas replied, shrugging nonchalantly. “Guess they didn’t do a very good job of it.”

Terra’s brow furrowed in disapproval. He was not consumed with the burning rage that gripped Aqua, probably because his interactions with Ventus’ dark twin were fleeting, but he was being particularly uncooperative. Terra tried to remind himself that the person standing in front of him with several knives pointed at his throat was not Sora – they may look almost identical but their personalities couldn’t be more different. Treating Vanitas the same way that they would treat Sora was going to get them nowhere fast.

“Well, if you guys have had quite enough of interpolating me, let me do the same,” Vanitas continued. “If Xehanort was killed, then what exactly happened to Sora to make him like this?”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop a couple degrees at his question. Most expressions were that of crushing guilt, only Terra and Riku continuing their eye contact with Vanitas as the others looked down or to the sides. Seems he had struck a nerve. He was going to remember that.

“We don’t know for certain,” Riku replied. “We were hoping that Sora could fill those details in himself.”

Sora blinked and then fished his Gummiphone out of Vanitas’ pocket. He wouldn’t put it past himself to have just broken it by dropping it at some point, but the screen was built to last and the rubber case should’ve absorbed any damage. Heaven knows he put his phone through the works while on his last adventure with nary a scratch. It looked more like it had been deliberately tampered with.

“No idea,” he admitted. “I always take photos wherever I go, but my phone is too damaged and I can’t access the Camera app.” He sheathed the device in his pocket and rubbed his nose in thought. “I remember going after Kairi’s heart… I had to go through some worlds that are still stuck in the Realm of Darkness, but for her heart to be saved someone had to take her place. I feel like I should remember what happened to me after that, but- “
“I brought you Sora!” Neku exclaimed, anger dripping from every word. “We had a bargain!”

Sora stopped in his tracks, almost ploughing straight into Neku as he abruptly halted in front of him. The ginger boy hadn’t been particularly receptive to Sora’s attempts at forging a friendship, or at least an alliance. His icy demeanour reminded him of Cloud, every playful jab or eager praise offered to him deflected with a stoic shield of indifference. Even though the brunette was nothing more than an irritant to him, Neku had never growled at him with the genuine rage that tainted his voice in that moment.

The object of his ire soon revealed himself, a thin man draped in familiar black robe and face concealed behind a hood that light couldn’t penetrate to reveal the person that lay within. Sora felt a chill run down his spine at the sight of the person garbed in the trench coat of the Organization. He had defeated the last of the members already, Xemnas falling to his Keyblade many moons ago and taking the legacy of Organization XIII with him. Who lay shrouded behind those cursed robes, and why would they associate themselves with the now defunct group?!

It seemed the man was more than ready to answer all of Sora’s questions. He bent his knees and leapt into the air far higher than gravity should allow, his trench coat billowing out around him like a raven spreading its wings. The figure’s face never moved from Sora’s for a single moment, even as he prepared to pounce on his prey from above.

“Hey! That wasn’t the deal!” Neku yelled at the man, eyebrows furrowing and a growl in his voice. “You said you wouldn’t hurt him!”

Vanitas blinked and rubbed his eyes, the nausea combining with the ice cream in his stomach and making him want to vomit; he got such a bad headache whenever that happened. It wasn’t enough that Sora was freeloading off his heart, he had to go and pilot it around too. It was only a matter of time before he tripped in front of oncoming traffic and sent the both of them on a one-way trip back to the Realm of Darkness.

“This whole thing is bullshit,” Roxas whispered, earning himself a smack on the head from Xion who had remained silent, quietly processing the situation without interjecting.

“I wonder…” Ventus mused, mostly to himself. “When Mast- ahem, Xehanort pulled all my darkness out of me and made Vanitas, Sora saved my life by joining his heart with mine. I can’t help but wonder if that’s what we’re looking at here.”

Vanitas nodded in agreement, until he realised what the implications of his brother’s words meant for him.

“Hold on a sec,” he yelled, “You’re telling me that Sora’s leeching off my heart?! I only have half a one, I don’t have enough to spare!”

“Hmm…” Yen Sid hummed deeply, the first sound he’d made since the young Keyblade wielders began fighting amongst themselves. “I think that Ventus’ words hold some truth, but I’m also concerned about Sora’s decision to bind his heart to Vanitas, and not to one of us.”

That was something Vanitas really wanted to know too, perhaps more than anyone else in the room. The two were sworn enemies, identical in appearance but opposites in alignment; it was more likely for the two to fight to the death than to prop each other up like they currently were. Literally anyone else would have been a better option. Hell, Xehanort would have made more sense, provided he wasn’t already dead himself at the time.
You were the closest that answered.

No one else came.

“That’s right,” Vanitas mumbled. “No one else came for him. I heard Sora calling out for help in the darkness, and I let him in. And that means—”

He summoned the Void Gear into his hand and pointed it at the enthralled Guardians of Light.

“This is all your fault.”

Roxas’ eyes widened at the accusations, before angrily summoning his own two Keyblades and lunging at Vanitas. Terra tried to grab his arm to stop him, but the blonde was just too quick. He collided face first into Vanitas, ready to disembowel the demon for his outrageous accusations, only to get a gloved fist in his mouth from Vanitas himself.

“Say that to my face you coward!”

“I just did, what are you, stupid?”

“Don’t you dare talk about Sora like that!”

“Your favourite drink is school glue!”

Yen Sid placed one hand on Riku’s shoulder, pulling his attention away from the mosh pit developing in his office as the boys continued their brawling. Xion pulled Roxas off Vanitas, keeping her face away from their flailing limbs, while Terra got Vanitas in a chokehold and dragged him backwards.

“Riku,” Yen Sid stated, as calm as ever. “Would you take our new ‘friend’ to visit the others in Radiant Garden. He may be unwilling to cooperate, but our best chance lies with the information stored inside Ansem’s computer.”

Riku nodded, ignored the sounds of crashing as a Keyblade was tossed across the room behind him, accompanied by loud swearing.

“Will do, the sooner we can get Sora out of this mess, the better.”

Vanitas was getting a lot of stares.

If Riku hadn’t outright told him that the world he had dragged him to was Radiant Garden, he wouldn’t have guessed in a million years. Granted, the black-haired boy’s experience with the illustrious castle and its acres of cobbled streets was mostly fleeting, whereas this town was more of a construction site. Riku could talk about how many improvements had been made until he was blue in the face – Vanitas wasn’t convinced that the walls wouldn’t crumble around him if he so much as breathed on them. Even the castle seemed to have chunks of rock bitten out of it by some kind of ungodly creature.

The atmosphere of the town hadn’t changed in the last decade, at least. If Vanitas allowed himself to overlook the shambles that the town was currently in, he could see vendors on every street corner, shouting loudly about their wares; the smell of freshly baked goods in the air; ice cream in the hands of every child. His stomach turned just thinking about it. Everything was business as usual as far as the locals were concerned, even as they stepped over the debris that littered the streets.
Vanitas was used to having nasty looks thrown at him, but the frequency at which he was experiencing them was staggering. As Riku frog-marched him through the marketplace he occasionally caught sight of a person in the corner of his vision; every time they would inevitably notice his presence and move as if coming to greet him, before abruptly stopping and turning away. He swore he saw the occasional expression of shock cross their faces, but whenever he turned to confront them they had looked away.

“They think I’ve brought Sora back,” Riku stated, his gaze firmly fixed forward with no discernible expression. “He has a lot of friends here that are waiting for him to come home.”

Vanitas opened his mouth to say something snarky in return, but closed it without a sound. He held no connection to these people, mere faces in an endless crowd of spectators, but he could feel the sharp stab of pain that punctured his chest for a moment at Riku’s sombre words. He grumbled to himself and put one hand over his heart, willing his overly vocal stowaway to keep his emotions to his damn self.

Riku led him up a rickety stairway, past a group of stalls that were... manned by ducks? OK sure, whatever. As they ascended above the marketplace, the smell of gasoline and dust filled his nostrils and the sound of machinery reverberated between his ears. No wonder the vendors were shouting so loud, Vanitas could barely hear himself think up here! What sort of backwater dive was Riku luring him to? Oh my God, what if he was about to kill him and dump his body somewhere?! Riku already had it out for him, and Vanitas was in no position to defend himself.

_He won’t. Riku’s not a murderer._

Vanitas wondered if Sora was giving his friends too much credit.

Riku had dragged him to some kind of workshop, random pieces of machinery strewn about like a death trap, and more than one suspicious stain on the exposed stone flooring. Sparks were shooting out from beneath a hunched figure of a man wearing a large metal face-cover and no protection on the rest of his body. The guy was seconds away from going up like a roman candle, but Riku reacted as if this was a common sight. He didn’t even attempt to shout at the man – there was no way his voice would carry over the sound of the welding – and instead just waved his arms around to get the figure’s attention.

The motion worked; the guy looked up from his workspace and gave a one-armed wave back, turning his welding gun off and sliding his helmet back to reveal his face. A mop of messy blonde hair toppled out of the helmet, held back by a pair of smudged brown aviator goggles with fingerprints all over the glass. Surely he should be **wearing** the goggles to protect his eyes?! And... was that a toothpick in his mouth? Under the mask?!

“Hey kid!” the stranger bellowed. “Yer lookin’ well.”

“Eh, same old same old,” Riku replied, bumping fists with the taller man. “Still trying to give up smoking?” He gestured to the toothpick that was still firmly lodged in the man’s teeth.

“Ha! Yuffie told me she’d kick my ass if she smelled smoke on my breath again!” he guffawed. “Too bad the gasoline covers up the smell so she can’t tell, eh?”

He wiped his nose smearing soot across his cheeks, and turned his attention to the black-haired boy who was standing silently with an incredulous look on his face.

“So, guess yer the Sora look-alike, eh? I’d recognise that spiky hair anywhere.”
Vanitas scowled at the ill-timed comparison and clenched his fists, but felt Riku’s hand rest heavily on his shoulder before he could pick a fight.

“Cid,” he said slowly, hesitant to allow Vanitas to attack everyone he came across. “This is Vanitas. He’s a…”

Riku looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“… Friend?”

“… I’m cooperating, that’s all,” Vanitas replied through gritted teeth. Cid sniggered under his breath.

“That’s all we can ask fer. That hothead friend o’ yours came by earlier, rantin’ an’ ravin’ bout how he’s gonna tear ya limb from limb. Said I should let him know when ya dropped by.”

Riku audibly groaned and put one hand on his face. He was one of the few to have met both Axel and Lea, and while Lea was significantly more level headed than his Nobody – not that this was difficult – he was still furiously protective of his friends. There was no doubt in his mind that the redhead was intending on following through with those threats. Riku did not want to go back to the Mysterious Tower with Vanitas in a casket. The raven Keyblade wielder decisively brushed the hand that still remained attached to his shoulder away, grimacing at the prolonged physical contact.

“Look,” Riku began, “Lea is gonna kill me for this, but please don’t tell him that we’ve arrived? Vanitas hates this more than any of us, but killing him isn’t going to do Sora any good either.”

“For what it’s worth, I would also appreciate not being torn limb from limb,” Vanitas concurred.

Cid chewed on his toothpick pensively, considering the request to withhold information from a friend. He seemed to agree with them, shaking his head in amusement and wrinkling his eyes with a smile.

“So what brings the two o’ ya here anyhow? Thought yer first stop would be the castle.”

Vanitas pointedly noticed that Cid did not concede to their pleas, but he wasn’t in a position to argue. He rummaged around in his pocket and produced Sora’s Gummiphone, careful not to catch his fingers on any of the sharp cracks in the screen. Cid’s eyebrows rose at the sight of the damaged device, almost disappearing beneath the goggles that remained glued to his hairline.

“The hell did ya do to it?!’ he questioned, taking the device from Vanitas’ hand and turning it over to inspect the damage. “These things are made of orichalcum fer Christ’s sake!”

Vanitas just shrugged. Not even Sora was able to answer that question.

“No idea,” he replied, “but Sora thinks we could jumpstart his memories if we can access the photos on it.”

Cid peeled the rubber Gummi casing away and winced as the extent of the damages revealed itself to him. Gummiphones were designed to withstand everything that their Keyblade wielders went through, the screen reinforced with orichalcum dust and protected with the same Gummi blocks that regularly achieved space flight. The only possibility that the mechanic could arrive at was that the device had been deliberately and malicious destroyed, and it couldn’t have been done by Sora – otherwise the kid wouldn’t be asking him to repair it.

“… Aye,” he finally agreed. “Would be easier just t’ give ya a new one, but I’ll see what I can do.”
Damn kids, eatin’ through all my supplies…”

“Oh, hey,” Vanitas interrupted. “While you’re at it, is there anything you can do about this?”

He held out his right hand in front of him and summoned his Keyblade. Vanitas could feel the call of the Void Gear in his heart, itching to be sunk into someone’s chest, but tried to keep an image of Sora in his mind. The only times he had summoned the Kingdom Key were purely by accident, done in the heat of the moment like an involuntary reflex, but the brunette must have been thinking the same thing as the silver blade appeared in his hand with a flash of light.

“I don’t think this thing is gonna be much use like this,” he explained, gesturing towards the bent teeth of the blade.

Cid eyed up the rusted weapon with a mixture of awe and concern. Keyblades were by no means indestructible – hell, Riku was currently on his *fifth* – but Sora had always been touchy about allowing anyone to come in contact with the Kingdom Key. Cid was an engineer, not a blacksmith, but even *he* would’ve sold his firstborn for a chance to handle and study such a legendary weapon, even in such poor condition. The rust was easy enough to remove, and the teeth could be hammered back into shape, but the missing keychain was a whole different problem. The keychains allowed Sora to change the form of his Keyblade, so without it he was stuck with the Kingdom Key.

“… Ya sure you’re alright with me handlin’ this thing?” Cid asked. “Sora was always mighty protective of it…”

Vanitas just shrugged nonchalantly and pushed the Keyblade into Cid’s hands before he could refuse.

“S’not my Keyblade, soooo…”

Cid tentatively accepted the weapon as rust flaked off the metal spine under his palms. He could feel the warmth of magic running through the silver blade even in its damaged state, warming his hands like he was standing by a fire. It was oddly comforting. He wordlessly turned away from the two, mumbling to himself as his brain began plotting out an action plan to repair the forlorn Keyblade. It may not be his area of expertise, but Cid would be damned to let such a precious opportunity pass him by.

Riku crossed him arms and gave Vanitas a look that he couldn’t place.

“You really are nothing like Sora,” he mused, mostly to himself. “He never lets anyone touch his Keyblade, not since he discovered it was technically supposed to belong to m-“

Riku’s eyes widened and he abruptly choked on his breath, bringing his train of thought to a close before he could say anything incriminating. He had almost forgotten who he was talking to.

“Uhh, never mind, haha… Let’s head up towards the castle. Cid’ll need some time.”

Vanitas’ yellow eyes narrowed suspiciously, but he said nothing. He could tell that Riku was walking on eggshells around him, something that was not entirely undeserved, but it was *far* more interesting to contemplate what the silver-haired boy had almost let slip. As far as his admittedly limited knowledge of Keyblades went, the only way for a Somebody to become a Keyblade wielder was to be bequeathed by an existing wielder. Vanitas, Roxas and Xion were the exceptions, granted their Keyblades by proxy because the hearts that had birthed them were already bound to an existing Keyblade. What was Riku insinuating, that the Kingdom Key wasn’t supposed to be Sora’s? And if so…
Who was it intended for?

The two backtracked down the stairs towards the marketplace where they were interrupted by yet another unknown figure. Vanitas was getting real sick of people popping out of the woodwork like that. The guy seemed to be wearing an entire Hot Topic’s worth of belts around his waist, a jacket adorned with the fierce image of a roaring lion, and a scar right between his eyes. He also bore a moody expression, one that rivalled the frown that perpetually soured Vanitas’ own features.

“I guess the rumours were true then,” the man grumbled. “The whole town’s been talking about you ever since you landed.”

“I seem to be getting that a lot,” Vanitas grumbled back in response. Something about the man’s haughty attitude was rubbing him the wrong way, not that it took much to get his hackles up.

“I’m taking him to the castle, Leon,” Riku stated, aware of the rising tension. “Yen Sid thinks there may be something useful on Ansem’s computer, and I’m here to make sure Vanitas doesn’t do anything stupid on the way.”

Evidently Riku wasn’t the only one to have noticed the hostile atmosphere – most of the townsfolk had cleared out of the immediate area and watched on with frightful expressions like they were witnessing a dog fight. He knew that both Leon and Vanitas had vicious tempers, but he could trust Leon not to raise a finger against the other denizens. Vanitas was a wild card. Then again, watching the older man kick Vanitas down a few pegs would be awfully satisfying…

“Hmph,” Leon grunted, unwavering in his intense stare. “Sora has a lot of people who care about him. If it comes out that you so much as looked at him funny, then there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Is this a joke?!” Vanitas spat back. “I’m getting real sick of everyone threatening me when I’ve done nothing to deserve it!”

“I mean, if you’re being serious then you did try to kill all of us,” Riku piped in. “And you did manage to kill Ventus at least once. Twice, if we’re being generous.”

“Not helping.”

Leon tutted and revealed his Gunblade, stowed away and attached to one of his many belts, and pointed the sharp end towards the black-haired boy. He had sworn to never raise his weapon against another person again, only using the unique combination of sword and revolver on the Heartless or the occasional Nobody, but if Vanitas was disturbing the peace then he needed to be taught some respect.

“I won’t tolerate any aggression in this town,” he stated stoically, his posture still relaxed even as he threatened the younger boy. Vanitas growled and summoned the Void Gear in his hand in retaliation. The Kingdom Key may be out of commission, but he was no defenceless Guardian of Light. He wouldn’t roll over and beg for mercy, even as he gasped his last breath.

“Oh yeah? Bring it on, Grandpa!”

Leon growled at the provocation and hefted the Gunblade over his right shoulder, shifting the weight behind him and darting forward to collide the metal weapon with Vanitas’ skull. He wasn’t cruel enough to use the sharpened edge against the raven boy, no matter how insufferable he was, but a blow from the blunt end would still get his point across. He blinked and Vanitas vanished as if he had never existed, but his combat-ready senses heard a gust of air from above, just in time to roll out of the way.
“Too slow!”

Vanitas teleported above his opponent and brought the Void Gear down into the ground, ice crystals shooting up from the exposed stone and leaving a layer of frost behind. At least he wasn’t so out of practice that his usual moves eluded his grasp. Leon rolled quickly out of the path of the ice shards, air whistling past his face as a few loose icicles barely grazed the skin on his cheeks. The kid was either moving so quickly that his eyes couldn’t keep up, or he was straight up teleporting around. Either way, attacking from a distance would do very little when Vanitas could close the gap in a heartbeat.

Vanitas had stabbed the ground so hard that the teeth of the Void Gear had become wedged between two slabs of stone; Leon used the opportunity to pivot on his axis and smack the Gunblade into the side of the Keyblade wielder’s head. Vanitas yelped in pain as the force of the blow sent him staggering backwards, thankfully also dislodging his Keyblade and breaking off loose chunks of cobble with it. Without missing a beat, Leon pulled the trigger on the hilt of his weapon, shooting a bullet from the hidden chamber down the side of the blade and towards Vanitas.

Vanitas wasn’t stunned enough to take that lying down. He shifted his hand to hold the Void Gear in a reverse grip and used the shaft of his Keyblade to slice clean through the bullet, two individual streams of fire streaking past him on either side as the two halves of the bullet ricocheted in different directions. Damn, that was pretty sick! He retaliated with his own Dark Firaga, a ball of ominous black fire lurching out of the tip of the Void Gear towards Leon like a missile. Vanitas didn’t actually expect the magic to hit such a nimble target; it was merely a distraction. Now that Leon’s attention was shifted towards the projectile blazing towards him, he could prepare an Arc Arcanum to quickly close the gap and-

Wait a moment, he didn’t know how to use Arc Arcanum! That was one of Sora’s moves, what on earth was he thinking?!

“Get him Leon! *Kick his ass!*” Riku cheered raucously from the sidelines, pumping his fist in the air as Vanitas narrowly deflected a downward swipe from Leon that was intended to slice him clean in half.

“WHO’S SIDE ARE YOU ON ANYWAY?” Vanitas yelled, straining against the weight of the Gunblade trying to break through his guard.

Vanitas was not above using dirty tactics to win a fight. As Leon put all his weight into the downwards blow, Vanitas used his free left hand to punch him straight in the gut, the brunette doubling over in pain. Riku booed from the peanut gallery at the shameful lack of sportsmanship, but Vanitas didn’t do him the honour of acknowledging his existence. Finally spotting his chance to fight back now that the older man was stunned, Vanitas let out a barking laugh and lunged forward, Keyblade ready to plunge into the chest of his enemy as he-

“They’ll come at you out of nowhere, and they’ll keep on coming at you as long as you continue to wield the Keyblade.”

*Sora paused and spun around at the voice that reverberated around the vacant plaza. Traverse Town already had an otherworldly atmosphere blanketing it, teetering on the edge of darkness and populated by refugees from destroyed worlds, and Sora supposed he could count himself among them. Still, he drew the line at hearing voices out of nowhere. He was being followed by a tall, muscular man with a long scar across his nose and a dark look in his eyes that hid a sorrowful past.*
“But why? Why would it chose a kid like you?”

Sora scowled at the man, his grip on the Kingdom Key tightening until his knuckles turned white. He was so sick of being told that he wasn’t good enough, wasn’t strong enough to fight. If they could’ve seen all those times he had almost beaten Riku in their sparring matches, they would be sorry they doubted him! Why were adults all such stuck-in-the-muds?

“Never mind,” the man snorted. “Now, let’s see that Keyblade.”

He took a few steps towards Sora, one hand outstretched to grasp the weapon that remained firmly in the brunette’s grasp. The man didn’t look like any Heartless he’d seen before, but anyone who tried to take his only means of saving his friends was still his enemy.

“What? There’s no way you’re getting this!”

Sora hesitantly readied himself for battle. His sparring with Riku had gotten him far enough against the Heartless, no better than feral animals, but this was another human. He didn’t want to have to fight a person! The man seemed to sense the weakness in his heart, and let out a snort.

“All right,” he replied, revealing an enormous weapon with a viciously sharp blade and a loaded barrel.

“Have it your way.”

Vanitas recoiled backwards before he could land the blow, one hand on his forehead as a crushing pain swept through him. He felt like he’d been hit by a baseball bat, his vision obscured with flashing lights. Leon almost took the opportunity to strike back at his now stunned opponent, but he wasn’t some morally-grey scumbag. He took a couple steps backwards as Vanitas fell to his knees, only to back up into something solid and unyielding that had crept up behind him during the struggle.

“Didn’t Aerith tell you not to fight children.”

Leon flinched as a hand firmly rested itself on his shoulder, still tense with adrenaline from the battle. He turned to see Cloud giving him his usual deadpan stare, eyes icy blue and unfeeling. Leon tutted and lowered his Gunblade, allowing his posture to relax and stood back upright.

“You talk like I make a habit of it,” he replied. Cloud almost smiled, the corner of his mouth barely curling upwards in amusement. If Leon didn’t know him, he would think the blonde was an unapproachable asshole. Only part of that was true – Cloud was still an asshole. The blonde removed his hand from his friend’s shoulder and offered it to the downed Vanitas, who promptly batted it away and pulled himself to his feet unaided.

“You know,” Cloud remarked softly. “I used to be the same as you – consumed with rage at a world that told me I didn’t have a place in it. Your light is what sets you apart from the Heartless, it’s what makes you unique.”

“I’m literally a being of pure darkness,” Vanitas snarled back. “I have no light in my heart to lose. In fact, my ‘light’ belongs to a different person entirely.”

“Even so, that light is still yours, just as much as it is theirs,” Cloud replied. “Don’t lose sight of it. It’s what keeps us human, and you’ll never fill the void it will leave behind if you let it go.”

“I couldn’t be farther from ‘human’,” Vanitas growled, as if the word itself was a slur on his tongue.
“Do all of Sora’s friends infuriating speak in riddles?!”

Cloud’s relationship with Sora was always a little… *unconventional*. The first time the two had crossed paths was at the Olympus Coliseum, and the two had fought viciously while Hades pulled the strings from behind the scenes. Would he describe their relationship as ‘brotherly’? Cloud didn’t have any remaining family, at least none that he cared to waste a thought on, so the idea of having a little brother under his wing was so foreign to him.

Still, the emotions he felt towards the boy in front of him were conflicted, and a sizable portion of that came from the face that glowered back. Cloud sometimes wished that Sora was a little less happy-go-lucky and naïve, perhaps a little more like *him*? No, he wouldn’t wish such a curse on anyone. The blonde would love for Sora to be just a little less trusting of those looking to manipulate him, just a tiny bit less willing to throw himself headfirst into any adventure that called his name. The look of unbridled malice that sullied Vanitas’ face – the face that was so similar and yet so different to Sora’s – made him realise just how precious the brunette’s purity was in a world that was so filled with darkness.

He had seen that look before. It was the same look of fury that used to linger in his own eyes. The same way he looked at Sephiroth.

“Perhaps,” Cloud responded, backing down as he realised talking to the enraged boy wasn’t going to get him anywhere. “Sora taught me that lesson many years ago. I hope a time comes where you are able to learn it too.”

Vanitas simply growled in response and pushed past the blonde, his shoulders raised like a bomb ready to go off at any moment. Riku gave Cloud a look of exasperation and chased after the retreating figure.

“When did you get so wise?” Leon questioned, only half serious, and raised one arm to rest it on the shoulder of the shorter blonde. Cloud didn’t react to the rhetorical question, his vision still focused on the pair of Keyblade wielders as they vanished into the thick forest of houses that lined the winding streets of Radiant Garden.

Sora had saved Cloud from his own self destruction, but was Sora able to do the same for himself?

Sometimes Lea wasn’t sure where ‘Lea’ ended and ‘Axel’ began.

This wasn’t strictly a bad thing, not in his books. The two were *technically* the same person after all, two sides of the same coin, although it still surprised him at the two extremes his own personality could take. Lea truly lived up to the nickname of ‘hothead’, impulsive and perhaps a little abrasive – Axel on the other hand was calculated and manipulative, able to put his feelings aside for the sake of following orders. It was one of the reasons why Xemnas put so much faith in him to carry out all his dirty work, including assassinating the other members of the Organization if they stepped a toe out of line. Xemnas could’ve commanded Axel to take his own life if it suited him, and the redhead would’ve followed with no recourse.

Lea could probably do with some of Axel’s obedience right now. If Axel was in his position, watching Ienzo stick pads to Vanitas’ exposed chest to hook him up to various imposing machines that did god-knows-what, the Nobody would’ve simply observed in silence and let him get on with it. In comparison, the only thing keeping Lea from socking Vanitas in the face was Isa, leaning against a wall with his arms crossed and eyes closed in deep thought. The redhead wasn’t the most… *observant* person, but even he could see the exhaustion that weighed down on Vanitas’ shoulders and behind his sickly yellow eyes. The brat was significantly weaker than the few times that Lea had
encountered him, so the chance of retaliation was pretty low. It would also be really satisfying to marry his fist with Vanitas’ mouth.

Lea just couldn’t bring himself to lay a hand on the face that look so much like Sora.

He still felt guilty that he had never really paid Sora back for everything the brunette had done for him. Sure, that was because he had essentially offed himself before Lea could have a chance, but still! Sora was the only person he knew who could still happily offer an olive branch to the person who had repeatedly tried to kill him. Hell, the kid would’ve tried to befriend Xehanort had the old man not immediately died, and Lea didn’t doubt that Sora would’ve been successful. Axel didn’t deserve to be offered a second change after everything he had done, but Lea was going to make sure that Sora’s mercy was not in vain.

Lea’s relationship with Sora was a little complicated no matter which way you sliced it, even ignoring all those times Axel had tried to behead the brunette with his chakrams. He wasn’t kidding when he admitted that Sora made him feel the same way that Roxas did – the redhead had the uncontrollable urge to wrap him up in a blanket like a burrito and fight anyone who tried to lay a finger on him. Heaven knows it was the least that Sora deserved, having saved the universe more times than he could count and never asking for anything in return. Axel despised the purity that radiated from Sora’s heart, but Lea only desired to protect it. The world was cruel and such precious innocence was too easily lost.

It was funny that Vanitas didn’t give him the same feeling. He and Sora shared the same face, but the only thing Lea felt towards him was hate.

Isa was the voice of reason, as per usual, pointing out that Lea and Vanitas shared a lot in common. Once Lea stopped cussing his friend out for suggesting such a vile prospect, he explained that both Lea and Vanitas knew how it felt to be constantly confused for someone else. For Lea, it was Axel – his fiery Nobody was the first persona that most of the Guardians of Light had encountered, barring the apprentices who were all now significantly older than the rest of them, despite their youthful appearances. For Vanitas, it was Sora – the boy who shared his face. If anyone could sympathise with the black-haired Keyblade wielder then surely it was Lea.

Lea absolutely did not sympathise with Vanitas in the slightest, but he supposed Isa had a point. He’d let him live. For now.

He opted to flick through the messages on his Gummiphone instead, trying to entertain himself while Ienzo worked on the multitude of machines and Vanitas sat staring into space. It was at least nice to see that things were starting to get back to normal in the group chat – Lea could only take so much freaking out from his younger friends. Xion had posted a selfie of herself smiling brightly with one hand resting on the head of an extremely fluffy white Samoyed.

number_imaginary: met this good boye today at tram common
10_year_nap: oh lawd he comin
white_witch: him chonk
Master_Aqua: He’s very floofy, thank you for the lovely picture Xion.
sOHotmOnFire: B O D E
notanobody: not to be dramatic but i would die for him
number_imaginary: not to be dramatic but me too

The only person who wanted to kill Vanitas more than Lea was Vanitas himself. The scientist had poked and prodded him with a variety of torture devices, all in the name of discovering the truth behind Sora’s residence in his heart, and he could only count the tiles on the ceiling so many times
before his brain cells began to die off. He didn’t have that many to spare these days! The longer he spent suffering in the presence of the denizens of light, the more he longed for the mind-numbing boredom of the Realm of Darkness.

“How are you feeling, Vanitas?” Ienzo queried, tearing off a strip of paper that had been spat out of the machine he was hooked up to and perusing its contents.

“I’m contemplating the sweet release of death,” Vanitas replied, completely deadpan. Ienzo plucked the tabs off his pale chest, allowing him to slip his suit back up and over his shoulders.

“That’s a little dramatic,” Isa remarked. He received an acidic glower in response from the raven boy, but didn’t rise to the provocation. Lea snorted in amusement – he couldn’t help but draw just the tiniest bit of satisfaction at seeing one of his enemies knocked down to the point that no one was taking him seriously.

“Trust me, there’s a queue forming to be the first one to kick your scrawny ass,” he sniggered.

“I don’t understand you people,” Vanitas growled, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. “One minute you’re trying to help, and the next you’re threatening to kill me! If you’re gonna do it then just do it now for god’s sake, just send me back to the Realm of Darkness. Anything is better than dealing with this bullshit.”

“No swearing in the lab,” Ienzo commanded, not even looking up from his reading at the outburst. “Your heart is under enough stress as it is.”

“Did you find something?” Riku asked, his attention piqued at the thought of making headway into rescuing his friend.

“Mmm…” Ienzo mused to himself. “Well, we at least know that Vanitas is telling the truth. It’s faint, but his echocardiogram does indeed show two heartbeats.”

“Wait, Vanitas has a heart?!” Lea exclaimed in mock horror.

“Oh, very funny, you’re such a comedian,” Vanitas spat back at him. “Now what are we gonna do about it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Ienzo replied, brushing his bangs out of his eyes only for the grey strands to fall right back into place. “I scoured Master Ansem’s archives, but the only record that exists of someone binding their heart to another and surviving is Sora himself.”

“Well, why don’t we just ask him?” Lea proposed, gesturing at Vanitas who was still seated on the assessment table. “He’s literally right there.”

Vanitas turned such a bright shade of cherry red that Ienzo was concerned he had actually had a heart attack, steam shooting out of both ears at the blasé statement from the redhead.

“I SWEAR TO GOD, SAY THAT TO ME AGAIN YOU DOLLAR STORE GOTH, I’LL RIP YOUR HEAD OFF AND USE IT AS A RAMMEKIN!”

“Can you please not threaten everyone who looks at you funny for five minutes?” Riku growled back, his own hackles raised at the provocation.

“Bite me, you beach boys reject.”

“Pardon the intrusion, but I’ve just received some interesting data from His Highness that may
prove useful.”

Vanitas abruptly ceased in his arguing with his glorified chaperone at the new voice, coming from
the computer terminal itself. The sound was overly tinny, distorted a little by the speakers, and
carried a slight mechanical timbre that sounded decided inhuman.

“What now?!?” he groaned to himself.

“Thank you, Tron,” Ienzo replied, just glad that he wasn’t going to witness a brawl break out so
close to his delicate equipment. “Please, go ahead.”

“My pleasure!” Tron agreed, a pixelated smiley face displayed on the main monitor. “The King has
just uploaded a copy of Data-Sora’s coding to my mainframe. We should consider using this new
information as a benchmark to compare Sora’s current condition to. Data-Sora was programmed
with all of Sora’s personality and memories before he entered Castle Oblivion, so his coding is
rather outdated, but if Vanitas is correct in his description of the heart that currently resides within
him, then Sora may be missing some vital components that would result in a fatal error if we attempt
to separate them too soon.”

“…That’s actually not a bad idea…” Ienzo mused, one hand over his mouth and charcoal eyes cast
downwards in deep thought. “There’s already a precedent of this, at least to some extent. We used
some of the left over data from when Roxas was imprisoned in the virtual Twilight Town to rebuild
his heart, that way he could survive outside of Sora’s body within a Replica.”

“So what,” Lea interjected, not fully following the conversation with the spattering of technical
mumbo-jumbo. “We can’t just smack Vanitas three way ‘til Sunday until Sora pops out of him?”

“I greatly oppose any plan that involves smacking me three ways ‘til Sunday!”

“I never thought I would say this, but I agreed with Vanitas,” Riku stated, the words tasting bitter on
his tongue. “It took Ventus ten years to recover enough to wake up. If Sora’s heart is damaged as
much as we’re being led to believe, then there’s no way he’d survive being catapulted out of Vanitas
right now.”

“I believe the colloquial term would be ‘blue-screen-of-death’,” Tron concurred.

“What a monumental pain in the ass…” Lea groaned, running one hand through his wild mane of
red hair. He couldn’t begin to fathom what sort of trauma would be needed to render such a powerful
heart as Sora’s completely desolate. Hell, the kid had even survived Xehanort ripping all of the light
out of him in a gross perversion of what the bald man had put Ventus through, and still came out
victorious with his identity intact.

Vanitas watched as the atmosphere in the room soured at the realisation that Sora was not going
anywhere quickly. Even Tron was unable to offer words of wisdom; there was simply no precedent
for such a situation and nothing to pull from his terabytes of knowledge that would alleviate the
problem. The raven Keyblade wielder grumbled and pushed himself off the table, jumping to his feet
sharply. He hadn’t suffered through endless barrages of interrogation to be told that his situation was
hopeless.

“Well, if brother dearest is too weak and pathetic to survive on his own, then we’ve just got to
strengthen him, right?” he remarked. “Those pieces of Sora’s heart have to be lying around
somewhere. If we can find them and just stick them together with some duct tape, he’ll be as good as
new and I can go back to dicking around doing whatever I want.”
Ienzo considered the black-haired boy’s statement. For all his words were lacking in any sort of finesse or tact – a trait he did share with the brunette – there was a basic logic behind his reasoning. Indeed, this was something they had done before with Roxas, and even with Xion and Naminé. Their circumstances were a little different as none of them were whole beings to begin with and so were more receptive to his attempts at filling in the holes in their hearts with data, whereas Sora’s heart would likely reject any artificial Band-Aids.

“I completely agree,” Isa agreed, breaking his period of silence after taking in the situation from the sidelines. “Sora has never given up on us, even in our darkest hours, so it is only right that we do the same for him.”

Ienzo turned and tossed his clipboard in the trashcan, wincing as the clanging noise of the metal receptacle against the granite flooring strained his ears. There was little use focusing on data, they needed to take a more unconventional approach. They needed to think like Sora, and heaven knows the brunette operated on logic that defied all known laws of the universe. He existed completely outside the realms of possibility; Ienzo suspected that this trait was the exact thing that had propelled the brunette into his position as the ‘key to everything’. That statement only proved itself to be more truthful as time went on.

“Tron and I will use the data we collected today and compare it to the left-over code from Data-Sora,” he explained. “That’ll help us determine just how much damage Sora’s heart has sustained during his absence. In the meantime, the most effective way to strengthen an ailing heart is by traversing the chain of memories that bind us together. If we can expose Sora to areas that have meaning to him, but not to Vanitas, that should buy us enough time to devise a formal plan.”

Vanitas looked down at the ground and clenched his fists while he considered the scientists words, before looking back up and nodding.

“Whatever man,” he agreed reluctantly. “I’m not in any position to complain. If it gets me out of here quicker, then I’ll play along.”

Riku smiled slightly at his words – Vanitas was only barely cooperating with their plans, and he couldn’t blame him. The last time the raven boy had encountered any Guardians of Light, he was their sworn enemy; it was like asking Riku to side with Maleficent on the off chance that she wouldn’t kill him when she was done. Sure, he had technically done that exact thing in the past, but the point still stood. He and Lea exchanged firm nods, palpable relief shared between them now they had a goal to work towards. It didn’t seem that long ago that they were stumbling around aimlessly in the Realm of Darkness, turning over every rock and slaying every Heartless in their quest for a single sight of chocolate brown hair or that playful laughter.

“You know,” he began. “We still have some time to kill before Cid’ll be done with the Kingdom Key. Why don’t we get started now?”

Vanitas cocked his head to one side in confusion. Riku flinched and blinked hard as the motion sent visions of sea-blue eyes and a toothy smile through his mind.

“What, retracing Sora’s memories?” he queried.

Riku crossed his arms. There wasn’t going to be a single part of this that would be easy.

“Yep. After all, we need memories that meant a lot to Sora, and just because something was meaningful, that doesn’t mean it was good.”
Riku was surprised to see Radiant Garden’s Keyhole still attached to an entire city block’s worth of machinery after all these years. It was no secret that Ansem, the bad one, had linked the gateway to the heart of the world to his stolen computer terminal to continue his research into Kingdom Hearts after he usurped the lab from the actual Ansem. That never stopped being confusing. It was possible that Ansem’s wicked scheme to reform Kingdom Hearts by allow the Heartless to consume the hearts of every world they descended upon like a scourge was born right here, born from the myriad of information stolen from the heart of Radiant Garden itself.

“I’m surprised the others haven’t taken all this down yet,” he murmured to himself, running his hand across a large pipe as if the Keyhole was on life support. Lea scoffed behind him, arms crossed and one eyebrow raised.

“No! I’m surprised the others haven’t taken all this down yet.”

“Do you want to be the one who volunteers to get started? ‘Cause it sure as hell won’t be me.”

Lea knew that Ansem, the good one, had denounced all of his previous research after the annihilation wrought under his stolen name, but part of him suspected that the remaining apprentices had continued his line of work without him. Even was too absorbed in his breakthroughs using Replicas, especially now that he had so many willing subjects, but Ienzo still had his nose stuck deep in tomes and scrolls about the nature of hearts. It was kinda nice to see – Zexion approached his research with such a cold and analytical nature, it was a nice change watching his grey eyes light up with joy at each iota of new information he was able to uncover.

He just hoped Ienzo knew what he was doing.

The two had all but dragged Vanitas by his ears up to the Keyhole, following their newly laid-out plans to bolster Sora’s heart. Lea didn’t understand most of the jargon that Ienzo spouted on the daily, but the idea seemed to be that exposing the brunette to powerful memories would kick his ass into gear so they could pluck his heart out of Vanitas before the raven boy did a runner. The redhead had no idea what they were going to do with Sora’s heart once they had it, seeing as they didn’t have a body to slap it in to, but perhaps Even had another Replica lying around. They were practically coming out of the woodwork these days.

Lea was familiar with Ansem’s castle long before Xehanort showed up and rubbed his evil all over everything. He and Isa had spent countless hours breaking in through the back door and creeping around the empty corridors in search of treasure and mysteries when they were kids, although the redhead had never wandered into this section of the castle before. It was up so many elevators that they were on the verge of breaking through the clouds in the sky, and the ride was supremely awkward with Vanitas will stewing in his rage.

“Alright, let’s get this over with,” Vanitas grumbled, walking towards the psychedelic portal. “Should I go in that thing, or…?”

“No!” Riku yelled at the suggestion. “That’s the entrance to the Keyhole, who knows if you’ll ever come back out!”

Vanitas inspected the portal in front of him as it undulated like colourful ink, various wires and tubing disappearing within its depths. Xehanort had banged on about the ‘heart of the world’ so many times that his own ears began to bleed, but the black-haired Keyblade wielder had never seen a Keyhole in person. It stretched from the floor to the ceiling, many meters tall was like a castle gate, and emitted a slight breeze that flowed through the skirt of his bodysuit as if he was standing outside.

It was a little creepy.

“But they all look like this?”
“Nah, most Keyholes aren’t even physical,” Riku replied, poking at one of the monitors still wired up to the portal to see if any of the equipment was still active. “Sora had to use his Keyblade to summon them; I guess some of these machines must be keeping it corporeal.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot you’ve never seen one of these things before, huh?” Lea remarked, rubbing his exposed arms as the breeze sent shivers running down them with the unnatural chill. “Well, Ienzo did say to try and drag up memories that were important to Sora and not to you… Is it working?”

Vanitas dragged his yellow eyes away from the hypnotic warping of the Keyhole, crossed both arms, and closed his eyes in thought. It had been well over a decade since he touched down in Radiant Garden to carry out Xehanort’s schemes, and he certainly never entered the castle before. Strange… something seemed awfully familiar about this place, and it really shouldn’t.

*This place has nothing but painful memories.*

“Mmm,” Riku agreed. “This is where Sora and I fought for the second time, when I was possessed by Ansem. It’s also where Sora released Kairi’s heart from inside himself. I just hope we don’t need to use the same technique again.”

“Too right,” Lea replied. “Didn’t he straight up stab himself?! The kid is pretty hardcore.”

Vanitas hadn’t realised he’d said anything out loud, the musing about painful memories coming from Sora and not from himself. He had no memories to associate with this place, although he couldn’t deny that the Keyhole cast a shadow over the area that smothered the trio with a sense of suffocating despair. Sora had always been resolute that the heart was made of light, but the heart of the world in front of him couldn’t be further from the truth. He could almost hear the sounds of clashing weapons, yelling and crying, and the feeling of something sharp in his chest…

“Hey, you still with us?”

Riku placed one hand on Sora’s shoulder and jostled him gently to break the trance that he had fallen into. The black-haired boy took a couple of heavy blinks before snapping back into full awareness, releasing the breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding and looking around in a wild panic.

“The Keyhole?” he questioned, confusion in his yellow eyes. “W-When did we get here?”

Riku mirrored the look of confusion that had taken over Sora’s gaze, before realising that he was no longer in the presence of Vanitas, although he had no idea what caused the sudden shift. It was like speaking to someone with multiple personalities.

“Just a couple of minutes ago,” he replied as calmly as he could. “Ienzo wants us to trigger your memories to help strengthen your heart before we separate you from Vanitas.”

“My memories…” Sora mused, placing one hand over his… over Vanitas’ chest. “But why this one? Why here? I have so many happy memories, why did we chose one that holds so much pain?”

Riku winced and withdrew his hand, clenching it by his side at the outburst. He really didn’t know what to say. He should be comforting his best friend, explaining the plan they had formulated and how he was going to be OK, but the words wouldn’t come to mind. He was taken right back to that moment he had decided to abandon his search, the only remaining member of the Guardians of Light that still scoured every corner of the Realm of Darkness until finally there were none left and Sora almost slipped through their fingers.

“This whole thing sucks,” Sora lamented. “I’m being such a bother to everyone…”
“No,” Riku replied firmly, his sense of self-pity washed away as he firmly refuted Sora’s claim. “I don’t want to hear you saying that again. None of this is your fault.”

Lea’s ears perked up at Riku’s statement, and he moved to cut across him.

“I’m probably gonna sound like a right asshole for saying this, but… you’re wrong. This is Sora’s fault.”

The expression on Riku’s face suddenly shifted to one of fury, his cheeks burning red with anger that the man who called him their friend was turning on Sora so quickly.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?!” he demanded. Lea sighed and put one hand on his hips.

“It’s like this,” he explained. “Sora is absolutely to blame because he knew the risks of using the Power of Awakening and did it anyway – he put himself in this situation. Just the same that I’m responsible for Kairi being kidnapped by Xehanort, seeing as I was the one who brought her to him, and you’re responsible for letting Ansem use darkness to control you.”

Lea firmly put both hands on Sora’s shoulders, feeling Vanitas’ muscles below his palms where the brunette had only skin and bone, pulling his gaze up from the defeated stare at the floor and back to his eyes. Funny, how even though those eyes were the same pale yellow that pissed him off so badly before, they still triggered the overwhelming desire to protect the brunette when there was another person behind the eyes.

“I know it sounds harsh, but lying to yourself and saying you did nothing wrong, that this is just the hand that fate dealt you, is a farce. You need to accept the blame for your part in this, because it’s the only way you’ll be able to forgive yourself. Got it memorized?”

The miserable expression on Sora’s face broke as he let a laugh slip past his lips at the cringy catchphrase. That was one thing that Lea didn’t miss about his time as Axel – he thought he was so cool saying that, but it was just an embarrassment to think about. Riku still didn’t look happy, but his features held an expression of stubborn self-reflection, rather than fury.

“Did you ever manage to forgive yourself, Lea?”

“Still working on it,” he laughed back. “I’m not good at all this soppy stuff.”

Sora grinned back at him, and Lea released his grip on his shoulders. Strange that as expression that was so familiar on Sora’s features seemed so foreign when framed by jet black hair. The smile wavered for a moment as Vanitas rested his hand on his chest, feeling the second heartbeat that pounded away alongside his own growing stronger as if his own heart was about to be swallowed whole.

“Strange… I feel… sad?”

“I mean, that seems like a reasonable reaction to everything you’re going through right now, Sora,” Riku replied with a slight smirk. His friend could be so obtuse when it came to his own emotions.

“Not him, me,” Vanitas insisted, his usual grit returning to his voice. “I’m… sad. I don’t think I’ve ever felt ‘sad’ before…”

What a strange feeling. Ever since the day he had been forcibly ripped out of Ventus’ heart and dumped into the world with no name or face he had only experienced bursts of burning hate. If he was lucky, sometimes he would even feel apathetic. Vanitas had plenty in his half-baked existence to
feel upset about, but his emotions had only ever manifested themselves as rage, didn’t matter who it was directed towards. It was easier than sitting around crying like a baby – that certainly wouldn’t get him any closer to ending his existence and freeing himself from his pain.

Was this sorrow just part of owning a whole heart? And if so, was it really worth it?

“Even? Could I trouble you for a moment?”

Even was so absorbed in his work that he was completely oblivious to the outside world around him. He was elbow deep in a Replica, something he was tentatively referring to as ‘Replica 2: Electric Boogaloo’, his lab coat stained with some ungodly fluids from the homunculus and platinum hair pinned back in a ponytail. The Replica appeared identical to the previous models he had churned out before, skin a pale alabaster white and face completely devoid of features that would indicate it was intended to be human. The insides were a whole different story, designed to mimic organs perfectly even down to the molecular level.

Even pulled out a string of intestines and inspected them closely, his face protected from splatters of bodily fluids by a pale blue surgical mask. The demand for Replica bodies was through the roof, although the only people who really needed them were the several thousand iterations of Sora that had no bodies of their own. With his advancements in technology they could use the Replicas for organ transplants, teleportation, they could even move all the kids into these new bodies that were way more durable and less likely to have limbs drop off. Plus, Even got to continue his research, and that was the most important thing to him.

Ienzo sighed at the lack of response from his superior, but was not overly surprised. Even’s laser-focus on his work had never faltered, even during his time in the Organization, to the point where it bordered on obsessive. The blonde had a great sense of humour, but try and pull him away from his work and he would bite your head clean off. Ienzo only made that mistake once.

Still, this development was so serious that he was willing to brave the consequences.

Ienzo picked his way through the room, stepping over loose wires and piles of paper that were an awful fire hazard and set his anxiety running, and coughed loudly to get Even’s attention. The blonde jumped out of his skin and straight into the light hanging from an armature above his head, clattered to the ground and shattering with a deafening cacophony. Ienzo stood frozen in place at the destruction his intrusion had caused as Even groaned with pain. That was going to leave a mark.

“… It better be important,” he muttered, rubbing his head.

“I wouldn’t disturb you if it wasn’t,” Ienzo insisted. “Did you hear about Sora?”

“Oh yes, the kid finally clawed his way back from death for the umpteenth time,” Even remarked. “After all the times he let people piggy back off his heart it’s about time that someone finally paid him back.”

Ienzo nodded in agreement. He considered Zexion as a completely separate individual, the Nobody’s personality so far removed from his own that the two were practically strangers. Zexion beheld Sora with a sense of apathy, a twerp who would have been incredibly interesting to study but nothing more than a potential science project. Ienzo saw Sora as a kind-hearted child who had been plucked from his peaceful life and dropped into a war while he was barely toying with the idea of puberty. Poor guy.

“Well, Tron and I have been running over the data we collected from Vanitas and Sora for a few
hours – comparing it to the coding from Data-Sora that the King provided us with, but…”

Ienzo took a shaky breath and braced himself.

“Could you… come check my work?”

Even looked at him in silence, before breaking out into raucous laughing and pulling his face mask off.

“Is that all? It’s been a while since you wanted me to check if you remembered to carry the 1. You’re talking like Sora’s life is hanging in the balance!”

“Well…” Ienzo trailed off, flinching at just how close the scientist had come to the truth. “It’s probably for the best that you see for yourself.”

Even shook his head in mock exasperation and removed his surgical equipment, dropping it on the floor and stepping over it. He could see how his former-student’s eyes glued themselves to the mess he was making, Ienzo’s obsession with cleanliness and order a prime target for teasing. Even didn’t really care, his gown was so drenched with sticky fluid from his experiments that it needed to be incinerated anyway. Even though Ienzo had graduated from his apprenticeship under the mad scientist, he couldn’t help but cave to his request at assistance. What kind of scientist would he be if he didn’t help his fellow scholar anyway?

Besides, Ienzo hadn’t made any serious mistakes in years. His work was probably fine.

…

Oh.

That wasn’t fine.

“Are you sure you didn’t miss anything?” Even probed, looking at the data with a look of incredulous shock on his face. Ienzo shook his head in disappointment, his grey hair almost glowing blue under the light of the computer screen.

“I thought the same, but Tron has run the simulation five times. It’s all correct.”

“Affirmative,” Tron replied from the computer, running through the waterfall of information that he had amassed. “Vanitas’ heart is as expected – it holds half the mass of a normal heart and what he does possess is contrived of only darkness. By all accounts, Sora’s heart should be at least the same volume as it was when Data-Sora was created, but it currently holds less than a quarter of its matter.”

“A quarter,” Even balked. “H-How is he not dead?”

“According to all knowledge we have about the Power of Waking, he should be,” Ienzo groaned, head in his hand as a migraine battered the insides of his eyeballs. “Using the Power of Waking to restore a lost heart requires a sacrifice to be made in its place. Sora’s heart is strong, but the probability of him surviving the experience is functionally zero.”

Even looked back down at the data he was presented with, searching it for any signs of spelling errors or miscalculations that could’ve resulted in such a dramatic conclusion. Sora laughed in the face of probability – the fact that his Nobody was able to exist at the same time as he did was proof of that – so the idea of the brunette surviving a fatal blow wasn’t too farfetched. What didn’t make sense was how he was able to survive on such a tiny sliver of heart. He shouldn’t even be able to
speak, never mind summon his Keyblade or overpower Vanitas to use his body.

What in the actual hell had happened to him?!

“Unfortunately, that’s not all,” Tron continued, changing his monitor to display a 3D render of Sora’s heart that he had generated. “Now that we’ve confirmed that Vanitas’ heart is comprised of pure darkness, there is a significant risk that his heart will attempt to indoctrinate Sora’s light into its own mass to account for the missing half that remains with Ventus. If this happens, it may become impossible to separate them.”

“So instead of trying to verge back with Ventus, Vanitas’ heart is trying to merge with Sora.”

“It appears so.”

Even groaned heavily at the death sentence Sora had been given. This was it; they were living the worst-case scenario. Vanitas was the single thing keeping Sora alive, and also the thing that was sucking him dry even though the raven boy likely had no idea. He locked eyes with Ienzo, his crystal-blue eyes betrayed the concern that lay beneath his icy façade. His pupil looked like he was taking the revelation personally, as if this was his fault for not being able to come up with a solution that would fix everything in an instant. Ienzo was exceptionally intelligent and sharp minded, but Even sometimes forgot that he was barely older than Sora himself.

Looks like they may need his new Replica sooner than they first thought.
re:Match

Chapter Summary

This chapter can be summarised by: Xion and Kairi kick ASS, Vanitas gets his ass KICKED, Sora kicks ASS. Don’t you love it when Kairi gets to use her Keyblade and is a competent fighter for more than five minutes before being captured? And yes, I know there’s technically no postcard in the Vacant House, but shut up

Traverse Town had always been a bit of a ghost town, even when it had denizens to walk its streets. Now that it was abandoned it only seemed to fit the description more.

Vanitas couldn’t help but think of San Fransokyo – the swathes of neon lights and tight alleyways were oddly reminiscent of the sprawling metropolis. Twilight Town was more of a quaint village, brown cobbled stones beneath his feet instead of unfeeling concrete, houses held up by rickety wooden frames instead of astronomical skyscrapers. It was like a town out of a story book, at least it would have been if it wasn’t deserted. The air was stagnant as if no one had disturbed it in years, dust caking every surface and the smell of mould permeating the air.

Vanitas grimaced and pulled out his Gummiphone, checking the photo again. Yen Sid hoped repairing the device would give them access to any images Sora had taken while he was missing, although the black-haired boy wasn’t sure how he would’ve even operated the damn thing while he was an incorporeal heart. It seemed the brunette found a way; the phone’s memory was jam packed with dozens upon dozens of images, most of them selfies of Sora making goofy faces with his friends in the background. Did one person really need that many photos of Lucky Emblems? And why had he kept them all?!

He really needed to stop trying to apply logic to Sora’s actions.

The majority of the photos were inconsequential, but the last few were a little more… interesting. Cid wasn’t a software engineer so his repairs were strictly limited to the device itself, meaning that any content that was corrupted would remain so. He could replace the SIM card, but the photos weren’t exactly stored to the ‘cloud’, and Sora had protested loudly at changing his number for fear of being booted from the group chat. Any images captured before the brunette’s disappearance were intact, but the ones taken after the event were…

There were only two that could be salvaged, the others corrupted to the point of incoherence. The first was of a long passageway, puddles of water splattered everywhere as if caught in a torrential downpour, yet the skies clear enough to see the eerie moon hovering overhead. If it hadn’t been for the shape, Vanitas would’ve sword it was the same view he had of Kingdom Hearts while he was stuck in the Realm of Darkness. They had considered the possibility that this was a photo of The World That Never Was, but despite the world’s misleading name it had continued to exist long after Xemnas was destroyed, and no such alleyway existed.

The second photo was much more mysterious. Sora must’ve used a timer to take the photo as he was part of the image, standing with a wide grin on his face next to three boys and two girls and pulling a pose like he was flexing with his weedy arms. The image had suffered some artifacting, which Cid attributed to the water damage the phone had sustained, but Vanitas didn’t completely buy it. The
corruption of the image was localised to the faces of each of the five strangers, the outfits and frankly ridiculous hairstyles crystal clear against the miserable backdrop of grey metallic walls, but their faces blurred and warped beyond recognition.

If it was simply water damage, then why had it targeted only those specific people? No, this was deliberate. Someone had tampered with the images.

Riku has been visibly disturbed at the sight of the photo, although Lea’s green eyes remained clouded with confusion. Even through the layers of distortion, Riku claimed he knew these people. He and Sora had met them before, albeit separately, during their Marks of Mastery. The explosion of ginger hair parted by lavender headphones belonged to ‘Neku’. The slicked back dirty-blonde mop and button down shirt belonged to ‘Joshua’. The brown cap and black stuffed cat belonged to ‘Shiki’. The skull beanie and thick chain belonged to ‘Beat’. The bell necklace and baggy white shorts belonged to ‘Rhyme’.

Vanitas had no clue what Riku was talking about in the slightest, but it was clear that the group had more in common than just their awful fashion sense. Both Sora and Riku had encountered these people in Traverse Town, although only in the Sleeping Realm, and Sora had not taken this photo before he disappeared. Wondering if these people had kidnapped the brunette was perhaps a bit of a stretch, but they were at least involved in some way, and it was the only lead they had.

“Has anyone even been back here since the exam?” Vanitas questioned his ‘companions’. “This place is a dump!”

“It wasn’t always like this,” Kairi remarked, running one finger down a table and leaving a trail in the dust. “I didn’t spend too long here myself, but it was a major hub for Sora during his fight against Ansem. It’s been a few years since then, though.”

Vanitas had accepted that the Guardians of Light weren’t going to allow him to investigate on his own. If Aqua or Riku were able to get their way he would’ve been wearing a shock collar, or chained up in Yen Sid’s basement. The others didn’t trust Vanitas as far as they could throw him, rightly so, but had at least accepted that he was playing along so were content to merely chaperone him everywhere. If he lied to himself he could almost say he had bodyguards! Really, it was more for the benefit of the people around him.

“I’ve certainly never been here before,” Xion quipped. “Something about this place is giving me the creeps… and it’s not Vanitas for once.”

“That’s a shame,” he smirked, earning a condescending glare from the girl.

Why was he stuck with these two of all people? Sure, they both had Keyblades of their own, but Kairi had maybe used hers like twice max and Xion’s was a straight rip-off of the Kingdom Key. Out of all the Guardians, Vanitas had no doubt that these two were the weakest, the least experienced in combat, the most inconsequential. It still wasn’t too late – he could take them both on at once with little effort and then disappear into the night. Cid had completely repaired the Kingdom Key and beaten the weapon back into shape, so who knows what kinds of doors he could open…

“DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT.” Kairi stressed, picking up on the scheming look in Vanitas’ eyes. “I kicked your butt on Destiny Islands earlier, don’t think I won’t do it again.”

Vanitas’ yellow eyes widened and he coughed awkwardly at the realisation that he had been caught plotting. Stupid Guardians of Light; assholes, the lot of them.

“I was just thinking about what I had done to deserve being stuck with you two,” he grumbled,
crossing his arms and pouting slightly.

“Would you rather it be Aqua?”

Vanitas didn’t dignify that with a reply.

“I’m the only one besides Riku who’s even been to this place,” Kairi continued, tucking her chestnut hair behind one ear. “I actually know my way around here, and now that Traverse Town is abandoned we might run into something ugly if we don’t stick to the main areas.”

“I was basically a clone of Sora for a while, so I guess we have that in common, huh?” Xion explained. “Besides, the next closest person to Sora is Roxas, and I don’t trust him not to shank you in an alley yet.”

Vanitas opened his mouth to reply, but furrowed his brow and closed his mouth without a sound. He did not consider himself to be a replica of anyone, not even Ventus, but she at least had some logic behind her statement. Xion was born as a faceless Replica until Sora happened to her, his memories filtering between their hearts until she was completely indistinct from the brunette. If anyone could understand what it felt like to be overlooked for the sake of Sora, then it was her.

“Let’s just get this over with,” he huffed. “Where are we going and what are we doing.”

“Well…” Kairi answered, tipping her head back in thought and looking up at the cloudy night sky above her. “If Ienzo wants us to trigger Sora’s memories, then we should make our way towards any locations that would be meaningful to him.”

“Great. Fantastic. What about right here.”

Vanitas wandered over to what used to be a café, a sign hanging overhead in the shape of a coffee mug but sullied with dirt and dangling by a single hook. Tables and chairs still stood outside waiting for customers that would never come, draped with red and white chequered cloths and half-filled wine glasses as if the occupants had vanished mid-meal. His eyes caught a blue symbol on the ground, faded and chipped with age but in the distinct shape of a Lucky Emblem. He felt the urge to jump on it, but had no idea what that would even achieve.

“This place reminds me of Little Chef’s Bistro!” Xion exclaimed. “How romantic would it be to have dinner here in the moonlight?”

Her aqua blue eyes took on a wistful hue as she imagined the scene. Her, Roxas, and Lea sitting together at a table, stealing from each other’s plates and watching the world go by. Such moments of tranquillity were so rare to them.

“Gross,” Vanitas remarked. “I’m not feeling anything special about this place.”

Xion frowned and adjusted the collar of her charcoal blouse. She was one of the few Guardians who hadn’t completely made their mind up about Vanitas and labelled him a traitor. Perhaps she was a little biased – both of them had been puppets to Xehanort, both were part of the Real Organization XIII, both had their hearts unwillingly tied to Sora’s before they even had their own names. It was an awful feeling, not one that Xion would wish on her worst enemy.

Still, Vanitas was making it really difficult to want to help him. She suspected he was doing it on purpose.

“That’s about what I expected,” Kairi stated, disappointed but not surprised. “I can’t remember Sora hanging around here too often. The food was terrible! Let’s try though here.”
She walked away from the two black-haired Keyblade wielders, oblivious to the way they were scowling at each other, and approached one of the two sets of wooden doors. The doors were so tall that they completely eclipsed any light that attempted to peek over the colossal walls, designed to keep any Heartless trapped on one side if they tried to overrun the town. Thankfully, that aspect of its design had never been tested.

“There’s a small house in the third district where I was sheltered after Sora rescued me,” Kairi explained, resting one hand on the rotting door and feeling the wood splinter under her gentle touch. “It was our base of operations during the fight against Ansem. If there’s any place in Traverse Town to get a reaction out of Sora, then this is it.”

She pushed against the door harder, the soft wood caving slightly under her weight, only for the door to push back. The deep mahogany had warped with age and the two doors were firmly stuck together. Kairi frowned, taking one of the dull metal handles in her grip and pulling back against the door instead of pushing. The door slid open by barely an inch before sticking and resisting her attempts to gain access to the district that lay beyond its threshold.

“Huh…” she remarked. “Is it locked?”

“What d’ya mean ‘locked’?!” Vanitas exclaimed incredulously. “We have three giant keys between us! You know what, never mind, get out of the way.”

He promptly pushed past Kairi and approached the doors, ignoring the protests from his companions. Vanitas sized them up for a moment before spinning around on one foot and roundhouse kicking the seam between the doors as hard as he could. The warped wood couldn’t stand up to such an impact and were forced open, creaking as if they would fall off their hinges at any moment. The sound of splintering wood echoed around the silent plaza as Vanitas brute forced his way into the third district.

The several dozen Heartless that were previously trapped beyond the impenetrable doors stopped and stared at the three Keyblade wielders.

Vanitas stood completely still, one foot still raised in the air and eyes wide at the sight. For a moment there was total silence before the horde of Heartless jumped into action against their foes with harrowing screeches. Vanitas yelped and jumped backwards, almost colliding with Kairi and Xion who whizzed past him with their Keyblades already summoned and itching for a brawl.

“Goddamn it, Vanitas!” Xion yelled, her replica Kingdom Key slicing through a few stray Shadows that tried to leap at her. “Get in here and help us!”

…

Vanitas considered his options for a moment.

If he was planned on ditching the Guardians of Light before they could murder him in cold blood, then this was the time. He watched as Kairi took a fireball to the face from a Large Body, its belly jiggling with every step, only to be sliced in the back by Xion sending it flying across the district. The two girls were so absorbed in the battle that Vanitas could slip into the shadows where he was most comfortable and be on his way before they even noticed he was gone. No more being threatened with maiming if he didn’t comply with their wishes, no more being confused with Sora. He could just go and be free.

He took a single step backwards with yellow eyes still glued to the fighting in front of him before feeling a hand wrap around his wrist, holding him in place. Vanitas looked down at his arm but saw nothing other than his protective leather suit, and his own clenched fist.
I won’t let you leave them.

Goddamn it.

Goddamn it all to hell.

Vanitas snarled and jumped into action, summoning the Void Gear and carving a path through the few Heartless that weren’t engaged in furious combat against the girls. Shadows weren’t too threatening at the best of times, and with their attention focused elsewhere Vanitas barely had to put any effort into tearing them to shreds. A Soldier spotted his approach like an enraged bull with a burning desire for blood and tried to swipe at him with its razor-sharp claws. It would be the last mistake the Heartless would ever make, the long reach of the Void Gear thwacking against its shiny silver helmet and throwing it backwards against its cohorts.

“It’s about time!” Kairi yelled, this time dodging the fireball that tried to burn her ginger hair off and kicking a Shadow hard enough to send it flying.

Vanitas grumbled under his breath that his assistance was not offered by choice, but gave his attention to the rampaging Heartless. Rather than try and hold back the tide with only his Keyblade, he called upon his inherent magic and shot a Dark Thundaga from the tip of the Void Gear, letting lose a barrage of lightning bolts shrouded in an ebony black aura that pierced down from the heavens and electrified everything within a five foot radius. Thankfully that didn’t include his teammates.

As his boots hit the shattered paving stones of the district beneath him, Vanitas was overcome by an all-encompassing wave of exhaustion that swept out from his chest to the tip of his toes. His Keyblade suddenly felt as if it weighed 100 lb, almost slipping out of his grip as his fingers refused to remain wrapped around the hilt. A grunt left his lips as he staggered to one knee, as if all the strength had been sapped from his legs and they couldn’t keep him upright against the pull of gravity.

Vanitas wasn’t a stranger to these unprovoked feelings of tiredness, but each time he experienced one they seemed to be getting worse. He hadn’t even been hit by anything this time!

Kairi spotted Vanitas falling to one knee out of the corner of her eye. She sliced through the air with Destiny’s Embrace, sending a wave of Shadows and a few stray Soldiers cascading past the metal blade, before dropping a heal. Frankly, the raven boy didn’t deserve it for taking so long to pull his finger out of his ass and help them fight the Heartless that he pissed off, but he was still integral to the plan. She was looking forward to telling the others that Vanitas was taken out by a few Shadows.

“Thanks for the pocket heal! Didn’t need it!” Vanitas remarked, the green healing magic flowing over his skin and bringing vitality back into his limbs. Kairi figured that was as good of a ‘thank you’ that she was going to get out of him.

He jumped back up to his feet in time to spot a Large Body charging at him, knocking the smaller Heartless out of its way as it blindly bolted with its belly out. Being hit by one of those was like being hit by a school bus. Vanitas didn’t have time to dodge out of the warpath, so instead used the strong shaft of the Void Gear to repel the Large Body’s attack, cringing as the force of impact vibrated down his arms. The Heartless bounced clean off the Keyblade as if it had run headfirst into a brick wall, followed by Xion batting it away by swinging her Keyblade like a golf club. The last Vanitas saw of the Heartless, it was crashing through the front window of a nearby building.

“FORE!”

Vanitas noted that the Heartless weren’t really challenging the three of them. Granted, every single person had a Keyblade to their name, but it was obvious that the gremlins were now leaderless. Any
remotely competent leader would have the creatures attack as a group, taking advantage of the confusion wrought by Vanitas barging through the door headfirst to get some pot shots in. No Heartless could stand against the might of a Keyblade, even if two of the blades were in the hands of walking cabbages. Not counting himself, of course.

“What are these guys even doing here?” Vanitas questioned, stabbing the Void gear through the head of the last Shadow as the three cleared out the area. “If Xehanort got his ass handed to him, the Heartless shouldn’t have anyone pulling their strings…”

“They don’t.” Xion confirmed, brushing her grey skirt back down as the ruffles had become misaligned in the scuffle. “The Heartless are just a natural part of the universe. We can cut their numbers down all we want, but they’ll just worm their way back up from the Realm of Darkness eventually. Sounds like someone I know.”

Vanitas responded with a vicious glare. Kairi allowed her Keyblade to dissolve into light now that the Heartless threat was vanquished.

“Can we all agree not to start kicking down doors without knowing what’s lying behind it?” she pleaded, hands on her hips and staring pointedly at Vanitas. He snorted and held both hands up.

“I got us in, didn’t I?” he protested. “I thought you Guardians of Light were fans of the whole ‘kick it until it breaks’ approach to problem solving?”

“I’m saving that for you,” Kairi smiled back, only half serious. “You alright? I know you’ve been gone for three months, but I didn’t think I’d need to use healing magic so soon.”

Vanitas’ face turned a bright cherry red at the accusations, a mix of anger and embarrassment. Kairi bit back a laugh as he got himself worked up, the black-haired boy spitting with anger at the insinuation that he was weaker than expected.

“I didn’t ask you to help!” he growled. “I distinctly remember you begging me to come save you! How dare you challenge my abilities!”

Kairi and Xion exchanged identical amused looks as Vanitas continued his rant as steam shot out of his ears like a train. To be honest, the redhead was surprised that he hadn’t just abandoned them at the first sign of danger. The raven Keyblade wielder had demonstrated that he could us Corridors of Darkness to move around, but he hadn’t tried to summon a single portal since he was spat out by the Door to Light. Whether he just hadn’t thought about using one, or he was really that desperate to separate himself from Sora, she wasn’t concerned with the small details. Vanitas was like an angry dog on a leash, but as long as he was pointed towards their enemies and not towards them then she was content. Vanitas himself didn’t get a say in the matter.

She waited until he wore himself out a little with his empty threats of having them hanged, drawn and quarters for their slight against him before ushering the group towards the Vacant House. Even in its dilapidated state, Kairi still felt all her memories flowing back to her as the trio cautiously crossed the doorway, the peeling mint green wallpaper and shredded furniture taking her back to the first adventure she had been on. It might not have been a willing adventure, but an adventure none the less. Sora seemed to make friends with everyone he crossed paths with, but the people he encountered in Traverse Town were some of the few that remained in his life long after the town was lost to sleep.

“Man, the smell in here is really bad,” Xion groaned, wrinkling her nose as the scent of damp infiltrated her nostrils. “Being locked in the Sleeping Realm did nothing for this place.”
“Nah, it was always this bad,” Kairi grinned back at her. “Traverse Town is just really close to the edge of darkness. You get used to it.”

Xion didn’t believe her for two seconds. Kairi was a Princess of Heart; imagining her living in such repulsive squalor for any length time was a stretch of the imagination.

“Oh right, you’ve never even seen this place!” Kairi exclaimed, turning to Vanitas who was eyeing up some soggy cardboard boxes with a look of disgust on his face. “You know how Twilight Town is the closest world to the World That Never Was? Well, Traverse Town is the closest world to the Realm of Darkness. People used to appear here whenever their homes were devoured by the Heartless, but since Sora restored all the worlds after destroying Ansem, this place wasn’t needed and fell into a deep sleep.”

“And then Sora and Riku restored it during the failed Mark of Mastery,” Vanitas nodded, tiptoeing around the stained carpet like he would catch something. “But why? If all the worlds are restored then why bring back this one just to sit back and watch it rot away? If no one needs it, then why waste the energy?”

Xion huffed to herself and closed her eyes.

“Just because something isn’t needed anymore, doesn’t mean it should be forgotten,” she explained slowly. “This world has every right to exist, just the same as the others. It doesn’t need to prove its ‘value’ to us.”

Vanitas gave her an expression like she’d just recited a theoretical physics lecture to him. He really didn’t understand the idea of something existing beyond its predetermined value, even if its place was already filled by someone more useful. Xion supposed it was a product of his upbringing – he was created by Xehanort for one purpose, and that was to form the χ-blade with Ventus and bring about the end of all worlds. Vanitas was never given the opportunity to be more than he was intended to be, to reach out beyond what Xehanort had planned for him and find his own place in a world that never wanted him.

Xion knew how that felt. She supposed the two of them were just products of Xehanort’s madness, except she had been lucky enough to find herself surrounded by friends, by people who saw her as something other than just a worthless puppet, imitating a boy with brown hair with the ocean in his eyes. Vanitas had gone through everything alone. No wonder he was such an insufferable douchebag. Maybe Xion herself would’ve turned out similarly, had it not been for Roxas and Axel. The blonde had no idea how much his friendship had shaped her fate after he offered her that stick of sea salt ice cream, back before she had enough agency of her own to even form a sentence.

Maybe she was being too hard on Vanitas.

“GODDAMN IT, I STEPPED IN SOMETHING GROSS!”

… Never mind.

Xion turned her eyes away from the rampaging Vanitas in her sights and produced her Gummiphone from her skirt pocket. She was loath to allow her attention to drift away from the task at hand, but she was confident that the raven boy was not about to launch an escape attempt any time soon. Besides, if she knew her friends well enough then they would be glued to their own phones, hungering for an update or at least a sign that Vanitas hadn’t gone rogue and beheaded the two.

number_imaginary: hey guys
notanobody: omg xion thank god pls tell me vanitas hasn’t done anything stupid
soHotImOnFire: roxas is about to revolt
number_imaginary: when does vanitas ever do anything that ISNT stupid
10_year_nap: lmao ॅ(°ロ°*)ॅ
number_imaginary: we’re surprisingly ok
number_imaginary: we ran into a butt ton of heartless and vanitas got his ass beat but he hasn’t tried
to escape or kill us or anything
number_imaginary: hes just being annoying
Riku: WISH I COULDVE SEEN IT
number_imaginary: it was hilarious
Luna_Diviner: I’m impressed that Vanitas is managing to control himself so far. He agreed to the
plan in Radiant Garden, but I never expected him to actually keep
his word.
number_imaginary: ikr
Master_Aqua: That’s great news, thank you Xion. It gives me hope that perhaps we can see this plan
through. Right now, Vanitas is the biggest obstacle.
notanobody: im sure if he tries anything xion will kick his ass
Riku: XION WILL HAVE TO GET IN THE QUEUE
Riku: I ALREADY HAVE DIBS
Master_Aqua: Not if I get there first!

Vanitas cautiously moved around the room, stepping his feet over discarded boxes and miscellaneous
trash. There were still obvious signs that the room had been well lived in: a stack of unwashed dishes
in the corner, the thread worn away from one spot on the couch as if someone had rested there and
only there for long periods of time, the faded and sun-bleached paintings on the walls. His attention
in particular was drawn to a large imposing grandfather clock, one that once would’ve shone in
elegant brass but was now rusty and warped with neglect. Vanitas didn’t know why, but there was
something telling him that the clock was important. Something hidden behind the worn-down façade
that was useful to him.

He reached up and instinctively turned the clock hand until it read 7 o’clock.

The room shook with a booming DING DONG coming from the once dormant clock, Vanitas’
tampering having triggered some internal mechanism that now roared to life after over a year spent
stagnant. Xion almost threw her Gummiphone across the room and the sound of frightened squealing
pierced the air. Whether Vanitas was the source of the yelping would depend on who was asked.
The face of the grandfather clock opened, right where one would expect a small bird to pop out and
tweet, but instead ejected a small rectangle of paper out like a bullet. Vanitas fumbled with it for a
moment as it landed in his hands.

It was… a piece of cardboard? Vanitas turned it over in his hands to reveal a photo on one side,
colours running into an inky mess as the damp warped the year-old ink. Who knows how long it had
been sitting there waiting for someone to solve that riddle. Even through the kaleidoscope of
pigment, Vanitas could make out a series of red and white poisonous mushrooms surrounded by an
endless expanses of red roses, each being tended to by giant living playing cards.

“Wonderland?” he mused to himself. This was a world he couldn’t recall ever setting foot in, but the
name seemed to come to mind so effortlessly.

“Oh, you found a postcard!” Kairi remarked cheerfully, peering over his shoulder at the cardboard.
“That would’ve been a nice photo of Wonderland at one point. If you put it in the postbox, you’ll get
an item in return!”

Vanitas furrowed his brows in thought, more interested in the memory that was hovering at the edge
of his vision, spurred on by the photo of an unknown world. No doubt about it, this ‘postcard’ was triggering something in Sora’s heart that was causing his memories to awaken, but it slipped his grasp every time he reached out for it.

“You know,” Kairi said, just as deep in thought as Vanitas. “If this isn’t enough to get Sora’s brain ticking, then I can think of one more place we can try…”

Kairi shivered in the cold night air and pulled her hood over her head. She really needed to invest in a dress with sleeves.

For all she had tried to deny it, she knew before they even went on this mission that they would inevitably end up at the Waterway. Riku had approached her and asked her to go in his stead, something that she didn’t fully understand at the time. It was clear that Riku didn’t trust Vanitas as far as he could throw him, something Vanitas himself never disputed, so Kairi had half expected Riku to attach himself to the black-haired Keyblade wielder like a ball and chain. She was flattered that he trusted her enough to beat some sense into Vanitas if he tried anything stupid, but Traverse Town only held painful memories for her. Kairi didn’t know if she was strong enough yet to relive them.

She had a feeling that the Vacant House wouldn’t be enough. Sora’s time in Traverse Town was mostly spent in the Synthesis Shop, throwing precious materials into the furnace and seeing what came out the other side. Even after all this time, nothing had changed; Kairi was pretty sure that Sora was supporting the Moogles’ entire economy. That didn’t stop her from trying, though. The building was certainly important to her, a castle of peace with flimsy walls and filled with people she had never met but were no less willing to fight for her freedom. Really, the redhead was just delaying the inevitable, looking for any excuse not to delve back into the murky depths of the sewers and confront the memories that still lurked inside.

Riku had a serious guilt complex, one which was not wholly undeserved, but Kairi couldn’t let go of her role in Sora’s current predicament. The Waterway was the site of the mural, the place where Sora dropped down on one knee and swore on his life that he would do everything in his power to protect her. Now look where that promise had gotten him. Even before he sacrificed his life to save her stranded heart from the depths of darkness, the brunette had already thrown himself into the flames time and time again to defend not only Kairi, but every living being on every world. He had fulfilled his promise more times than Kairi could’ve asked him to do, and she knew he wouldn’t stop until he took his last breath. It just wasn’t his nature to allow suffering to persist while he was still able to raise his Keyblade and fight.

Now, she had to do the same for him. She would face those painful memories head-on if it meant Sora would be safe. It was time to fulfil her side of the promise.

Xion put one hand on her shoulder in solidarity, picking up on the redhead’s lowered mood and offered a small smile in its place. It had taken a lot of self-reflection for Xion to separate the parts of her own identity from those that were stolen from Sora, but now more than ever she craved just a single moment with the boy that had given his memories to allow Xion the chance to exist as her own person. The process would be painful, but the end of the road would be more than worth the journey to get there.

Vanitas could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The whole of Traverse Town suffocated under a stagnant atmosphere, the air remaining undisturbed as the town lay abandoned by the residents who had once called it ‘home’. The second district was abundant in the same sensation of stillness that smothered the town, but it was punctuated with an aura of malice. His yellow eyes scanned the area, peering into every shop window as the trio tentatively walked through the plaza, but not a single sign of movement caught his eye. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were
about to be… ambushed.

“We need to cut through the alley by the fountain,” Kairi explained, gesturing towards the far end of the district. “… Does anyone else feel that?”

“Mmm,” Vanitas grumbled in agreement. “Something isn’t right…”

The trio continued down the promenade, hackles raised like something was about to jump at them from behind any of the innumerable arches that lined the central pathway. Vanitas eyed up a neon sign reading ‘H_TEL’ in neon letters, one letter missing completely and one hanging on by a thread as the letters continued to glow for an audience that was no longer watching. Creepy. It was so quiet that he could hear the blood rushing through his veins, the crunching of dirt beneath their feet, the sound of Xion gently sniffing and rubbing her nose. Was he just being paranoid? Or…

His train of thought screeched to a halt as the green murky water sitting in the base of the fountain jettisoned into the air, showering down and splattering the ground just shy of the trio’s feet. Two enormous arms like tree trunks reached up out of the basin, metal fingers sharp as knives and covered with thick blue gauntlets. They clapsed the mossy edge of the fountain, stone cracking under its grasp, as the owner of the arms pulled itself out of the water feature. First a round head, three yellow spikes adorning the helmet and face obscured by a dull silver face plate. Next, an hourglass shaped torso topped with a deep blue collar and decorated with zigzags. Finally, two red feet that boomed against the ground with each step. None of the limbs were connected like a marionette, the whole thing flipped over without the head or torso moving in the slightest, giving Vanitas a good look at the Heartless emblem emblazoned on its chest.

“A Guard Armour!” Xion belted, the sounds of three Keyblades materialising echoing through the empty streets. “Is there no end to these Heartless?!”

Vanitas snarled at the sudden appearance of the Heartless as it took a step towards the group, arms rotating in their non-existent sockets like it was charging up an attack. He had no intention of letting the Heartless follow through with its threats. He darted forward and slid between its legs, the arms spinning around the torso like a saw blade as those sharp claws threatened to slice off a leg or two. Vanitas used his momentum to smack the underside of the torso hard enough to knock the whole thing upside down. The Heartless didn’t even react to his presence, continuing its path towards the two girls.

Xion and Kairi nodded to each other and split up, each taking one side of the Guard Armour. The Heartless might be able to control each limb independently, but it couldn’t watch both Keyblade wielders at once. Its armoured head turned to face Kairi as it raised one boot in the air, bringing it down and smashing into the ground. The shock wave that rippled through the paving almost knocked Kairi off her feet as she struggled to maintain her balance, but prevent her from spotting the other foot rise to collide with her head. She deflected the attack with Destiny’s Embrace, the force of their collision almost knocking the Keyblade out of her hand but succeeding in defending against the Heartless. The Guard Armour staggered backwards as it threatened to topple over, only to be met with a Keyblade in the back as Xion followed up with her own blow from behind.

The Heartless collapsed to the ground in a heap, its floating limbs seemingly unable to maintain their form and ending up in a pile of discarded metal scraps.

“We make a good team!” Kairi remarked, her and Xion exchanging a high five at their victory.

Something wasn’t right, though. If the Guard Armour was defeated, then why had the pieces remained?

The pile of discarded limbs jerked back to life before the celebration could continue, metal scraping
against the stone paving as the two arms flared out their fingers and pushed their palms against the ground. The torso flipped completely in the air, the collar now pointing towards the ground and helmet suspended upside down. Each leg took the place of the arms, snapping into place like armoured mittens, before the silver face plate opened to reveal a pair of venomous yellow eyes staring out from black depths.

It wasn’t done. And now it was angry.

Vanitas only felt macabre glee at the sight of the Heartless pulling itself back together for round two. The others could tease him all they wanted, he knew that those damned Shadows hadn’t come close to laying a finger on him. He didn’t spare a thought for the source of his unnatural exhaustion, there wasn’t a single fight he’d found himself in that had sated his hunger for a challenge. Not even Riku. Especially not Riku. He felt a malicious grin cross his face as he reaffirmed his grip on the Void Gear and charged back into battle guns blazing.

“Vanitas, wait!” Xion exclaimed as he closed in on his target. “We need to attack as a team!”

Vanitas ignored her protests, his lust for blood already clouding his vision and drowning out any voice of reason that he possessed. He shot towards his target, Void Gear burning his palm with the heat of magic flowing through the metal, ready to strike the Heartless down where it stood.

The Opposite Armour’s transformation was more than cosmetic. Before Vanitas had a chance to react it balled up it fists – feet? – and flipped in the air to sucker-punch him in the face before he could get any closer. The impact against his metal jaw sent him flying backwards, landing on his back and scraping his head against the stone ground as he slid past Kairi and Xion. Thank God his leather suit protected his skin from friction burns. His grip on his Keyblade remained firm and he dug the tip into the ground like an anchor, abruptly halting his grinding retreat and jumping back to his feet.

“Kairi!” Xion exclaimed, receiving a sharp nod from the redhead in response. The two darted forward as if moving as one, Keyblades in hand. The Opposite Armour reared back to slam its fists – feet? – into the approaching girls, but Xion peppered the area with a well timed Thundaga, the electricity running through the metal armour of the giant Heartless and stunning it before it could follow through. Kairi used the opportunity to jump up its limbs like she was climbing a titan and slammed Destiny’s Embrace into its face, the head spinning around rapidly and dizzying the Heartless before it could recover from the Thundaga.

Vanitas growled as he regained his stance and prepared a Shotlock. He was too afraid to try Dark Thundaga again after the last time almost left him out for the count, but Dark Link would allow him to strike all of the Heartless’ limbs with one move. Even though he had to fight as if he was facing five enemies at once, there was nothing that a little brute force couldn’t handle. Locking on to each limb, he felt vibrations run down each arm as he clasped the hilt of the Void Gear with both hands, three translucent crystals summoned from thin air and focusing a laser that rushed out of the tip of his Keyblade and towards the Heartless. Vanitas remembered his Shotlock involving a laser wide enough to split a tree in half, but the energy that left the Void Gear was more of a pencil thin stream.

“Watch it!” Kairi yelled, ducking just in time to avoid the laser piercing her head and cauterising her brain. “We’re on your side!”

Vanitas opened his mouth to bark something scathing in return, but before he could utter a single breath he face planted the ground. If he thought he had experienced exhaustion before then this must be what the embrace of death feels like. His limbs were made of lead, dragging him down into the ground as if it would swallow him whole. He could barely keep his eyes open, the sweet call of sleep whispering in his ear and tempting him to lie down and drift off into slumber.
Every time he used his abilities, his tiredness was getting worse.

“GODDAMN IT!” Vanitas yelled, pounding one fist into the ground in frustration. “What am I supposed to do if I can’t use the Keyblade?!”

“Imbeciles! You can’t be trusted to do anything!”

Donald sprinted towards the cloaked figure, the sound of his slapping feet hitting Sora’s ears even as the ground below him remained invisible. The figure vanished silently, leaving behind the white box he held that almost glowed in comparison to the endless darkness that surrounded the trio. Donald didn’t hesitate in picking the box up and turning it around in his hands, the sounds of something sliding around inside betraying the contents. They were lucky that the stranger hadn’t tried to plant a bomb in there, otherwise his careless mishandling would’ve sent them all to the Realm of Darkness.

“Are you sure ya wanna open-“ Goofy tried to protest as Donald flipped the lid of the box.

“-that?”

Well, it wasn’t a bomb at least. Inside the box were two items – a photograph and a bar of ice cream wrapped in sky blue plastic and emitting a sweet smell that Donald could pick up on without even unwrapping the treat. He inspected the photo, black eyes narrowed in suspicion, before passing it back to Sora who hovered nervously at his side. His attention was already captured by the ice cream anyway.

"Gawrsh, it’s the gang from Twilight Town!” Goofy exclaimed, surprise evident on his face at the unusual gift. “There’s Hayner, Pence, Olette… and uhh… umm…”

Funny, Goofy had never seen the other boy before. The photo was of the four teenagers in front of the dilapidated mansion, the same one that the trio had awoken from their sleep in. Whoever the other boy was, he sure did look happy. All of them did, smiles plastered on every face and all four making silly poses without a care in the world. They seemed like a motley crew; shame they hadn’t been able to meet this other boy before being whisked away from Twilight Town on yet another adventure. But why would Hayner and the others not even mention their friend to them?

"Roxas,” Sora stated, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “This is Roxas.”

Sora let out a startled gasp as the Heartless’ claws narrowly avoided his face, blocked by Kairi who had jumped in front of his prone figure to protect him. Even as she and Vanitas had been at each others throats, she was still ready to defend him while he was down. The redhead grunted as her Keyblade blocked the blow from the Opposite Armour, before turning back and offering a hand, a fierce expression burning in her blue eyes.

“Get up, Vanitas!” she yelled as Xion sprinted over to offer her own assistance. “We won’t win if we can’t cooperate.”

Sora gave her a confused look at hearing the wrong name, before snapping back to reality and accepting her hand and using Kairi’s weight to pull himself to his feet. He could feel the tiredness seeping into every cell in Vanitas’ body, but seeing two of his best friends stand between him and the Heartless when every instinct should have been to leave Vanitas to his fate filled him with the burning desire to push through the pain. He crossed both arms in front of himself before thrusting them out to either side, calling out for help with his heart and feeling both Keyblades respond in
tandem, the Void Gear in his right hand and the Kingdom Key in his left. Sora could feel how the Keyblades vibrated with power, resenting the weapon that lay an arms distance away but under the control of their shared master.

Sora had used two Keyblades before. Time to see if he still remembered how.

“We need to split the limbs off the main body!” he explained, hefting the Void Gear over his right shoulder. “I’ll take the main body, you guys divide up the legs and arms!”

The weight of the Void Gear’s much bulkier frame weighed heavily on his shoulder as he took the stance of his Valor Drive form. It had been way too long since he needed to rely on the power of any Drive forms – could he even consider his current predicament as a ‘Drive’? The Opposite Armour slid towards them, the gauntlets not touching the ground as they replaced the Heartless’ feet, and Sora responded by using Reversal and slipping around to the rear end. The Heartless’ head spun around to match his movements but moved far too quickly, whizzing around like a spinning top and stunning the giant.

Sora grimaced as his leg muscles screamed in protest as the earth still beckoned him to rest his head against the cool stone paving, but he powered through. He jumped into Ragnarok, swiping back and forth with both Keyblades and battering the torso of the Heartless without breaking a beat, finishing with a bombardment of energy pellets shot from the tip of the Void Gear in his right hand. The bullets spread out like a flower before decimating the Heartless, each shot homing in on a separate limb until the force of the explosion tore the Opposite Armour asunder and knocking the limbs away from each other.

Kairi and Xion didn’t allow the Heartless to catch them off guard with an early celebration this time, and jumped into action right as Sora finished his combo. Xion jumped straight into Strike Raid, lobbing the Kingdom Key a spinning arc as the weapon sliced through any Heartless limb in its path before materialising in her hand only to be thrown once more. Kairi dismissed Destiny’s Embrace for one moment, ignoring the Keyblade’s protests at being benched, and picked up the Opposite Armour’s gauntlets while it was stunned, spinning around in a reflection of the Heartless’ first attack. The redhead then released the two limbs which spot across the plaza into the torso and head, sending the whole construct into a shop front and leaving a crater behind.

The blow had the unfortunate side effect of forcing the three parts of the Opposite Armour back together, although it now had one boot sticking out where the head should be and the head was clasped in one of the gauntlets. It shuddered ominously and reformed into a cannon, the collar now aimed at the trio as a ball of glowing purple energy charged up ready to detonate and blow the whole district to smithereens. Before it could get the shot off, Kairi jumped and slammed her weight into the Heartless’ torso, dress billowing out around her thighs like rose petals, knocking it backwards and causing the shot to whiff. The energy ball pulsed upwards into the sky before exploding like fireworks.

“Good call, Kairi!” Sora cheered from the side-lines. “Let’s finish this!”

As Kairi’s feet touched down to earth she pivoted and swept Destiny’s Embrace in a sharp slicing motion, severing both gauntlets and crumbling them into dust. The Opposite Armour toppled to the ground without anything to hold it upright, but simply used the boots to pick itself up like a gorilla walking on its knuckles. Xion took the opportunity to freeze the legs solid before piercing them with the Kingdom Key, the Blizzaga magic shattering the metal armour and covering the ground with iridescent snowflakes. The torso was now essentially immobile without any limbs to move it around.

“SORA!” both girls yelled, turned back to face him and ready to deal the final blow.
Sora gave a toothy grin and charged forward, both Keyblade ready to sink deep into their prey, as the girls linked their hands together. He stepped onto their joined fingers as they boosted him into the air, hovering for a split second above the defenceless Heartless as its head rattled around with fear at its incoming fate. With a whoop of triumph, Sora sunk both Keyblades into the head, forcing it down into the void within the hollow torso as the Heartless disintegrated into shadow, leaving behind only a hoard of green health orbs where it once stood.

The eerie silence that once permeated the vacant district was nowhere to be found, cheering and hollering filling the air as the Guardians of Light celebrated their timely victory. Sora and Kairi jumped in the air and high fived each other with grins on their faces, followed by Sora and Xion then finally Xion and Kairi. Sora panted, feeling the tiredness begin to creep back into his muscles as his adrenaline boost started to wear off, somehow much lighter and less restrictive than before. It was as if the light of his magic had cast off the darkness and breathed life back into his body. *Man,* did he miss the rush of battle!

“Victory selfie!” Xion exclaimed, holding up her Gummiphone to catch a snapshot of their first victorious boss fight together. Kairi pulled her hood down to reveal her face flushed with adrenaline and clasped her hands behind her back, smiling warmly with eyes closed. Sora grinned from ear to ear and bashfully rubbed his nose. Xion made a peace sign with her free hand and took the photo, inspecting it to make sure she got a decent shot; her eyes widened in shock as she saw the contents of the photo, before slapping herself in the face.

For some reason, she had expected to see Sora in the photo, his untamed mane of brown hair and red plaid jacket standing next to Kairi. Somehow the sight of Vanitas’ inky black hair and muscular body suit had startled her, especially with such a jovial expression on his face. Xion had forgotten who was standing in front of her for a moment.

*Weird…*

“That was **awesome!**” Sora yelled, excitement in his golden eyes. “When did you two get so good?!”

Both Kairi and Xion blushed, cheeks turning rosy red as they looked away in embarrassment. They were equally guilty of slacking on their training since Sora had vanished, so his glowing praise wasn’t earned.

“Thanks, Sora,” Xion smiled back meekly. “We wouldn’t have won that if it wasn’t for you. I guess Vanitas doesn’t do well in groups.”

**Whose fault is that?**

Sora just shook his head in bewilderment. Both Kairi and Xion shared the same character flaw – they were far too trusting. Vanitas wasn’t their friend, nor was he really their enemy, so there was no precedent for the raven Keyblade wielder working as a team. Hell, he barely played well with the other Seekers of Darkness! He was a one-man army, and it seemed that he had no intentions of changing that.

“Actually, this is great timing!” Kairi exclaimed suddenly. “Sora, do you think you can hang around a little longer? You know, seeing as we’re trying to reawaken your memories and all?”

**Please, dear God, you deal with them. I’ve had enough.**

“Vanitas would be find with that,” Sora smirked back. “So… where we heading?”
Oh, that’s right. The Waterway. Kairi had so much fun fighting alongside her friends that the purpose of their visit to the second district had slipped her mind. This wasn’t going to be fun. She sighed, her good mood shattered as the severity of the situation returned to the forefront of her mind.

“Do you remember when we made that promise?” she explained. “You said you would always protect me, and I gave you the Wayfinder I made?”

Sora nodded.

“Well, its time we revisit that promise.”

The Waterway really hadn’t fared all that well after its time locked in the Sleeping Realm.

Sora couldn’t even really call it a Waterway any more. The river that ran through Traverse Town and crossed paths with Merlin’s house had long dried up, leaving a parched riverbed behind like a fossil of the majesty it once possessed. Moss covered every surface like a plush green carpet, crunching under his boots and staining everything it touched with a deep forest green. If one thing hadn’t changed it was the smell, a dank mix of mould and salt that made Sora wrinkle his nose in disgust.

At least they didn’t have to use the Red Trinity to gain access again. Sora didn’t doubt he would’ve ended up crushed at the front.

“Well, you two know more about this place that I do,” Xion remarked, a similar expression of disdain on her own features. “What’s the story here?”

Sora approached the mural on the wall wordlessly, his feet almost slipping on the jagged rocks below him where there once was an inch of water. At one point the mural would have shifted between a crescent moon and a glorious sun, but the magic in the ink had long faded into obscurity. He reached up and brushed one hand on the wall, the paint flaking away under his gentle touch. Sora jerked his hand backwards at his unintentional desecration of the monument, one of the only remaining relics of the people who once called this world their home.

“This is where Kairi and I reconnected after Hollow Bastion…” Sora mused, taking a few steps back. “She gave me her Wayfinder, said it would always bring me back home.”

“Yeah, you lost it immediately,” Kairi chuckled. “Should’ve known better than to think you could hang onto something for more than five minutes.”

Sora’s brow furrowed. The oath he had taken to always protect Kairi seemed a little invalid now, considering she had been kidnapped so many times and also straight up murdered by Xehanort. Besides, that was a time that Kairi was unable to defend herself – considering the battle he had just taken part in, it was clear his protection was no longer as mandatory as it once was. Out of all the Princesses of Heart, the redhead was the only one to have ever taken up arms and stood at the frontline, although her status as a Princess of Heart was a little debatable at that point. Mulan would like her a lot.

“I guess the legends about the Wayfinder were true, huh?” Kairi smiled, resting one hand on Sora’s shoulder in solidarity. “Maybe not in the way we expected, but you did find your way back home to us one way or another.”

Sora looked at Kairi, her gentle smile like the morning sun, and returned the expression. The brunette was still unsatisfied with his situation, angry that he wasn’t able to share his reunion with his friends on better terms, but the knowledge that his friends still loved him even in a different form softened the boulder in his heart. He still felt like he had drawn the short end of the straw on this one, but if
Kairi could look past his current appearance as see the boy that hid inside, then maybe he could do the same for himself.

This still doesn’t feel right.

Sora agreed. He lost his memories every other weekend so this wasn’t new to him, but his heart wasn’t resonating with this place as much as he had expected. It wasn’t like he had forgotten the events that took place in the shadowy grove, but the feeling of grief that had washed over him at the disappointed look in Kairi’s eyes as he refused to take her with him on his journey just… didn’t exist. It was like he was looking at a video recording of someone else’s life, only viewing the event without connecting his emotions to it.

“What’s wrong?” Kairi asked, noting the confusion on Sora’s face.

“… I think I’m remembering it wrong,” he replied, crossing his arms and closing his yellow eyes in thought. “This place should be giving me all kinds of feelings, but…”

“Well, why don’t you try telling us what you remember happening?” Xion offered. “Maybe that’ll spark some recollection in you?”

Well, it was at least worth a try. Here we go.

“A light at the end of the tunnel…”

Sora turned to look at Kairi, her sudden statement catching him off guard. Her eyes remained fixed on the mural across the wall from the two, emblazoned with a deep blue crescent moon now that the brunette had collected the Navi-Gummi and activated the magic within the paint. She had a faraway look in her eyes as if reliving a memory long forgotten.

“Oh, your grandma’s story, right?”

Kairi jumped slightly, pulled out of her reverie by the exclamation from her friend. For a moment she had forgotten she wasn’t alone, reliving the words of her grandmother as she remembered them. She gave Sora a slightly forlorn smile, the joy of reuniting with one of her two best friend’s tainted grey without the presence of the other.

“You know what’s funny?” Sora continued, closing the gap between the two. “I looked everywhere for you, but you were with me all along. Finally, we’re together, Kairi.”

Sora’s trademark smile wavered for a moment, cracking to reveal a look of steely determination. He broke his gaze with Kairi and stared back at the mural, not quite frowning but resolute in his stance. It was out of place on his soft features.

Kairi sighed, closing her eyes. She missed Riku dearly, more than words could say, but there was part of her that dreaded hearing Sora say those words. He had put himself in so much danger already, the thought of losing him again was unbearable. What happened to the days where the most difficult part of their lives was who won the inevitable sparring matches, or whether to eat ice cream or watermelon that day? And why were those idyllic days on the beach becoming harder and harder to remember?

Vanitas flinched at the name of their missing friend. He knew that Kairi’s words only carried the bitter truth, but hearing her say it out loud made their dire situation feel more tangible than he
was ready to deal with. His mouth suddenly felt dry and he couldn’t swallow the lump in his throat. Vanitas shook his head at her statement, jet black strands of hair shining like obsidian in the dim cave lighting. He refused to accept that Riku was unreachable after coming this far.

“When I turned into a Heartless, you saved me, remember?” he insisted. “I was lost in the darkness. I couldn’t find my way. As I stumbled through the dark, I started forgetting things – my friends, who I was… the darkness almost swallowed me.”

Kairi tightened the grip she had on her forearm at Vanitas’ words. She couldn’t bear to hear him talk about how he had suffered because of her, because he had to take his own life to free her heart. He was so willing to put himself in harm’s way for his friends, even when it wasn’t asked of him.

“But then, I heard a voice. YOUR voice,” he continued, putting one hand on the arm that Kairi was clutching hard enough to leave red imprints in her porcelain skin. “You brought me back.”

“Uhh, not to cut you off there but, that definitely not what happened,” Kairi interjected.

Sora paused in his narration and reopened his eyes, adjusting again to the low light after being lightly closed for so long.

“What do you mean? Did I say something weird?”

“Uhh, yeah, we hadn’t met Vanitas then? So…”

Sora blinked before realising that she was correct. Obviously, why on earth would he think that Vanitas of all people was present at that point! Maybe he had just spent too much time looking at Vanitas’ face staring back at him in every reflection. Let’s try that again

“I didn’t want to just forget about you, Vanitas Sora. I just couldn’t.” Sora’s eyes widened at Kairi’s admission, as if the puzzle pieces had suddenly clicked into place for him.

“That’s it” he exclaimed, the bright burst of hope in his sapphire eyes returning. “Our hearts are connected, and the light from our hearts broke through the darkness. I saw that light. I think… that’s what saved me.”

Sora placed one hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat pounding away under his palm. He never knew just how comforting his racing heart could feel to him after having gone a period of time without a pulse. It was a reminder that he was still alive, even after everything he had been through. He had coming out the other side kicking and screaming.

Now he needed to help Riku do the same.

“No matter how deep the darkness, a light shines within. I guess it’s more than just a fairy tale.”

Kairi smiled at him, the first genuine smile she had conjured since her heart was plucked from the depths of darkness by Sora’s light. If anyone could talk about the power of light, it was him. She felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her veins at Sora’s unwavering faith. She wanted to do anything in her power to assist him – hopefully she would be find some way to repay him for the endless sacrifices he had made.

“Well, let’s go!”
Vanitas’ grin wavered at her statement, seeing determination take over Kairi’s body as she clenched both hands in excitement. It had been so long since he witnessed the burning fire in her eyes. He couldn’t bear to see it extinguished because of him.

“You can’t go,” he said, eyes cast downwards in shame. “It’s way too dangerous.”

“Come on, Vanitas Sora! We made it this far by sticking together!” she insisted, her own enthusiasm shaken by the subdued expression crossing her friends face. “You can’t go alone.”

He could. He would. He would do anything to keep her out Ansem’s claws even if it meant throwing himself into the jaws of the beast once more. Vanitas knew Kairi wouldn’t accept that excuse, in fact it would probably just spur her on even more.

“Kairi,” he said firmly, taking her hands in his. When did his palms become so rough from battle, compared to her pale skin? “Even if we’re apart, we’re not alone any more… Right?”

Vanitas could feel Kairi gripping his hands harder with every word, like she was clinging on for dear life. Like he would slip through her fingers like smoke if she let go.

“I can’t help?” she insisted, voice cracking slightly with sadness.

“You’d kind of be in my way,” Vanitas grinned, his golden eyes creasing with a smile that didn’t quite seem to reach them. Kairi tried to return the gesture, but couldn’t find it within herself to force an expression of happiness. She knew he was going somewhere that he couldn’t follow, somewhere that he may never return from. She knew that there were no words in the world she could say to keep the stubborn brunette from staying with her, where it was safe. Right now, the best she could do was to let him go and trust that he would keep his word.

“… OK.”

She slipped her hands from his, her palms rubbed against the calluses than lined his hands from the hilt of the Kingdom Key. They were hands she no longer recognised. She let him go.

“NO, dammit!” Vanitas exclaimed, taking his head in his hands. “Knock it off, we both know that’s not right!”

“Whoa, hey!” Kairi exclaimed, concerned that Sora was about to hurt himself. “What’s wrong?”

“I– urgh!” Vanitas groaned. “My head is all mixed up, Sora doesn’t want to take this seriously. Goddammit… Rude.

“Vanitas, wait,” Xion started, instinctively moving to put one hand on his shoulder in solidarity but stopped before he could bite her hand off. “I know what’s happening! I’ve been through the same thing, I know how you feel.”

“Please, don’t patronise me,” Vanitas growled in response. “Don’t pretend to sympathise with me, I’m not interested.”

“I’m serious!” she insisted. “Vanitas, I was created for the sole purpose of leeching Sora’s memories away from him while he slept. I know what it’s like to try and recall a memory from your past only to see someone else’s face in your place. It’s awful, you feel like an imposter living someone else’s life
like a lie."

Xion overcame her fear of the raging beast that was Vanitas and rested her hand on his shoulder. She felt his muscles tense under her touch, but he made no effort to bat her away.

"Neither of us were meant to have an existence deeper than our preassigned purposes, but none of that matters. You’re here now, and it’s up to you to decide who you are. Your life is your own, and you can’t let anyone else take that from you."

A heavy silence fell over the trio at Xion’s words. It occurred to her that she was delivering her passionate speech to herself just as much as she was giving it to Vanitas. The only person who still saw Xion as a carbon copy of Sora was Xion herself; some days she needed to remind herself that Sora had given her the chance to become her own person, so that her name could be mentioned without flashes of brown hair and blue eyes. Vanitas was no copy of Sora – technically he was a copy of Ventus – but she hoped that somewhere in his shrivelled heart her words would resonate with him and spark a desire to live.

Vanitas scowled and pushed her hand off his shoulder.

"Thanks for the lecture," he spat, "but if you’ve forgotten, this isn’t some mission of self-discovery for me. I know need some punk-ass Guardians of Light telling me about my identity, we’re here for Sora."

Xion sighed in defeat. That’s right, she had forgotten that Vanitas was only on their side by force. At some point in their mission her mind had replaced the anger she felt towards their sworn enemy with the sibling love she felt towards his twin. Vanitas was not Sora, and he didn’t want to be. Shame on her for thinking he would respond to her attempt to fuel a fire in his heart with anything other than disdain. Xion had seen that the black-haired boy was capable of far more than the senseless violence he had engaged in as part of the Seekers of Darkness, but if he wasn’t able to accept that about himself then he was as good as lost.

Maybe one day, things could be different between them. Today was evidently not that day.

There were no more books to read, no more scrolls to tear open, and no more tomes to consult. Mickey had exhausted all his options.

He couldn’t tell how many days he had spent pulling book after book out of his bookshelves anymore. They just all blurred into the next. Sentient candlesticks kept him company, dodging the occasional falling manuscript as the mouse read the cover and tossed them away. There had to be some information he had missed, some long-forgotten book who’s author was lost to history and pages blurred with age. Some bastion of knowledge that he could turn to find the answers to his problem. There just had to be.

If it existed, then Mickey certainly hadn’t found it yet.

The last three months were the longest of his life. He didn’t know if he’d ever be able to pick up a book again, his eyes weary from scanning countless pages with meaningless words. Every day that passed was another day that Sora faded from view, swallowed by darkness until all that remained of his bright smile and blue eyes was lost in a memory. Mickey had lost too many good friends to his memories. He had no intention of losing another.

Minnie creaked the heavy door open just a crack, enough to let a stream of light into the darkened room. Mickey winced as the light burned his eyes, the candlesticks scampering away at the sudden
intrusion as the Queen tiptoed into the library.

“Do you really need to sit in the dark like this?” Minnie huffed.

“It helps my eyes,” Mickey replied gruffly. “Makes reading easier.”

If Mickey saw the forlorn expression on the Queen’s face, he certainly didn’t acknowledge it, turning back to the book he still had in his hand before scoffing and tossing it over his shoulder. He grasped the sides of the ladder with both hands and slid down to the floor, descending metres upon metres in a split second with how high he was. Any further up and he would reach the loneliest books, right by the ceiling.

“Will you come to bed?” Minnie asked tentatively. “You know that Sora wouldn’t want you doing this to yourself.”

Mickey sighed and rubbed his forehead, feeling the migraine hammering away behind his eyes sudden increase in intensity. Sora. Sora was the only name that had ran through his head for the last few months.

“Argh, I know but…”

Mickey’s thought trailed off as he sighed in defeat. His eyes drifted back over the library, shadows deepened by the light streaming in through the doorway and books littering the floor. Every thought of that lazy brown hair, scruffy like a bird nest and defying gravity framed with eyes like sapphires made the black hole sitting in his stomach expand until it threatened to devour his heart.

“He’s just a kid. I can’t leave him like this. Not again.”

Minnie crept up to his side and wrapped one arm around his waist, pecking him on the cheek before resting her head on his shoulder.

“Sora’s a lot stronger than you give him credit for,” she mused. “Besides, he has the most powerful people in the world searching for him. He’ll be back and pestering you to take the Gummiship out for a joyride in no time.”

Mickey snorted with restrained laughter, a small smile crossing his face. He snaked his arm around Minnie’s waist and squeezed her back in comfort. He really was a lucky guy to have someone as understanding and patient as his Queen. What she saw in that little steamboat lackey all those years ago, he would never know.

“Why are you always right?” he asked, jokingly.

“That’s why you married me, right?” Minnie laughed back. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes to clean this mess up before I come and drag you to bed myself.”

Mickey knew better than to argue with his wife, nodding and returning the chaste peck on her cheek. Minnie giggled and released her hold on his waist, quietly exiting the room and shutting the door behind her. She always knew how to break him out of his low moods, something as simple as a hug and a kiss from his beautiful wife lifting his spirits without missing a heartbeat. Funny, even after all these years of marriage he was still head over heels for her.

Still, the sombre feeling in his gut refused to shift. Mickey would describe his relationship with Sora as ‘tumultuous’, although the brunette would probably use more favourable terms. The mouse had a difficult time telling the difference between secrets needed to be shared, and secrets that were better left kept. He remembered how betrayed Sora had looked when he discovered that Mickey knew
where Riku was hiding and chose to keep the information from him. He fully understood why the King had made that decision – Riku at that point was indistinguishable from Ansem and was working through some personal problems – but Mickey had never forgiven himself for it.

He began to collect the tomes from their discarded spots on the floor and stacked them on his desk. He couldn’t bring himself to slot them back into their alphabetical places tonight, and he knew Minnie wasn’t kidding when she gave him fifteen minutes. One minute late and he’d be sleeping in the doghouse. Quietly moving through the castle, the plush red carpet underfoot muffling his footsteps so as not to disturb the other residents, he gave Pluto a scratch on the head before slipping into bed alongside his Queen.

Funnily enough, he had a good feeling about tomorrow. It was the first good feeling he’d had in months. Perhaps his luck was about to turn.

Mickey was awoken from the deepest sleep he’d had in a long time by incessant tweeting from his window. At first he tried to ignore it, rolling over in bed and mushing his face into the pillow, but his ears wouldn’t stop twitching every time that high pitched screech hit them. He peeked his eyes open, groggy from sleep, and threw off his covers with a groan. Pluto immediately leapt out of his bed, ball in mouth and sped around the room. Nothing like some early morning zoomies to get his master out of bed faster.

Mickey stumbled to the window, bunny slippers on each foot, and threw open the curtains to let the morning sun stream into the room. Unclasping the glass and opening the window let fresh air flow into the room and shake off some of the morning blues. The smell of freshly cut grass and dew hit his nose from the topiary garden outside his window. What an exquisite morning to witness, if only his loud annoying friend would stop tweeting like a fire alarm.

The motion of the window opening beckoned a small bluebird into the room, iridescent feathers shimmering like ice and something wrapped around its neck. It landed on Mickey’s shoulder and screeched in his ear, casting away all doubt that it wasn’t being annoying on purpose. Mickey batted it away, but it returned to his shoulder and continued hollering. It really wanted him to take the item affixed to its torso. Mickey grasped it and tugged it off, the fine string pulling away easily and allowing the bird to dart out of the window to freedom without a second thought.

Mickey grumbled to himself until he saw what he was holding. It was a parchment scroll neatly tied with a ruby red ribbon and sealed with wax bearing the stamp of a wizard’s hat.

Master Yen Sid.

He peeled away the wax, trying not to tear the fragile parchment in his rush to read to contents, and unfurled the scroll. Yen Sid had an unfortunate tendency to be rather loquacious with his letters, so Mickey was expecting an essay and a half. Instead, the scroll contained a mere two words, written with exquisite penmanship in ink that reflected a galaxy of colours.

IT’S TIME

Mickey didn’t need to be told twice. He had been subjected to Yen Sid’s riddles for so long that the meaning behind the words jumped out at him immediately. Someone had found Sora.

Someone had found Sora!

Minnie almost jumped clean out of bed as Mickey leapt into the air with a whoop and charged out of the room to the bathroom. Golly, he should make himself presentable! Whether one of his friends had snagged Sora out of the depths of darkness and he was waiting for a family reunion, or they had
merely zeroed in on his location and Mickey was needed to drag him home, this was the perfect opportunity to break out his Sunday best. Then again, his Sunday best did consist of his royal garb, golden crown included, so perhaps he would just settle on a shower.

Minnie barely had time to get out of bed before Mickey leapt out of the bathroom freshly washed and fully dressed in his so-called ‘Adventuring Gear’. Her heart sunk at the sight – Mickey hadn’t found it within himself to pull out those clothes since he returned to Disney Castle, head hanging in shame as he admitted that he had returned without Sora under his wing. Just the sight of them seemed to remind the King of his failure to protect those under him. Minnie had kept them clean and neatly folded just in case he changed his mind, but there was always a part of her that wished he would never don the magical clothes again.

The only time he wore those clothes, he didn’t return home for months.

“What’s going on?” she asked and Mickey flew around the room like a tornado. “Is everything OK?”

“Oh boy, it’s better than OK!” Mickey exclaimed loudly, jumping into his boots and slinging his jacket over his shoulders. “Master Yen Sid has found something to do with Sora! I knew we should never have given up all those months ago! Maybe he’s already back at the tower, boy has it been too long! Perhaps he’s been on some grand adventure, or perhaps…”

Mickey suddenly stopped in his passionate ranting and turned to face his wife, noticing the silence exuding from her side he started. Minnie stood before him, head lowered and hands intertwined with sadness, dressed in a silk nightgown like a classical painting. Was she… not excited about finally hearing word about Sora’s whereabouts? Why was she not revelling in joy at the news? She and Sora weren’t as close as they could be, but the two had fought off an army of Bolt Towers together when Maleficent had attempted to corrupt the Cornerstone of Light.

“Minnie, what’s wrong?” he asked, worried dripping from every word. He closed the gap between the two of them and placed his hands on her arms. She didn’t look up at him, her gaze fixed firmly to the floor.

“You’re leaving again.”

Ah.

Mickey would be lying if he hadn’t played this exact scenario in his head a million times over. His friends would joke that this was the first time he had stayed within the stone walls of Disney Castle for more than a week, but there was some truth within those jovial words. Every time the King found a moment to himself another clone of Xehanort would pop up and require his attention, and his role within the castle was increasingly covered by the Queen. Minnie had kept the world up and running smoothly for so long, Mickey wasn’t sure his presence was even needed anymore. Regardless of if he was needed, he needed this place. He needed his citizens, his wife, they were the blood in his veins and it caused him pain every time he had to leave them behind to fight in yet another war.

“I’m really sorry,” he began, apologising both to Minnie and to himself. “Every time something comes up, I always disappear. I wish I could tell you how long I’ll be away for, but…”

Mickey grimaced at his excuses. He had sworn that he would never be dishonest to his friends again, but his line of work seemed to require it at every turn. He knew that Minnie could tell when he was keeping things from her, even when he was doing it to protect her, and it filled him with shame.

“I can’t leave Sora again,” he explained. “I was the first to leave him behind. The others kept digging
up the Realm of Darkness, and would’ve continued until there was nothing left if it hadn’t been for me. I… I won’t do that to him again. He deserves better than what I’ve given him.”

Minnie trusted her husband with her entire heart, but hearing him speak those words out loud really drove the wedge in deeper as to how serious the situation was. She was so used to Mickey deflecting her questions with his usual “I’ll be back soon!” or “Keep the bed warm for me!” that actually witnessing him admit his shortcomings was something she never thought she’d live to see. She never doubted that he would keep his word, always returning to the castle victorious at some point, but it seemed the only way to stop him from disappearing into the ether in search of adventure was to chain him down.

If Mickey Mouse of all people was being serious about this, then it must really mean something to him.

“OK,” she finally agreed. “I won’t stop you from going, but only on two conditions.”

Mickey winced. Here she goes.

“Firstly, I don’t want to hear any of this self-depreciating talk from you again!” she demanded. “Sora knew what he was getting into by misusing the Power of Waking, and you know there’s no talking him out of anything. Besides, he’s a big boy, he can deal with the consequences.”

Mickey locked eyes with his wife, startled a little at her words. That wasn’t the first time he had heard that – Lea had also been adamant on his stance. The King still remembered the first time he had met Sora, barely fourteen years old and filled with youthful arrogance that led him headfirst into all manner of dangerous situations. It was true that the brunette was no longer that stubborn child he once was. Now he was a stubborn adult.

“And secondly,” she continued, softening her words slightly at the bewildered look on her husband’s face. “If you dare come back home without Sora safe and sound you’ll be sleeping in Pluto’s doghouse!”

Mickey’s distressed expression shattered instantly as he let out a burst of raucous laughter. He was sure she wasn’t kidding either! God save the man brave enough to incur the ire of his wife! Minnie own desolate frown turned upwards into a warm smile at the reaction, the first show of genuine joy she’d seen from her husband since Sora went missing.

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” Mickey asked through his laughter.

“Well, you could take the trash out once in a while.”

Mickey snorted and kissed his Queen. He still remembered the days spent working on Pete’s steam boat, shovelling coal into the furnace and coming home covered in soot. Minnie had stuck with him through thick and thin, through the good and the bad. She was always royalty in his heart, even during those days they wore second hand clothes and struggled to make ends meet. He was finally able to give her the life that she deserved.

“I promise,” he agreed, breaking their kiss. Minnie smiled and slapped him lightly on his cheek.

“You better get going then, don’t keep him waiting any longer.”

Mickey broke out into a cheeky grin and unwrapped himself from her arms to barrel out their room and down the hallway. Thank God he was fully dressed this time. His whooping and hollering had attracted quite a crowd of enchanted brooms that watched their King make a fool of himself. Minnie just shook her head in amusement.
“Chip! Dale! Grab Donald and Goofy, we’re going to fetch Sora!”

Minnie felt a hand rest on her shoulder as Daisy stumbled out of her own residence, bleary eyed and grumpy from the sudden awakening.

“What on earth is so important to make this racket so early?! I still have four hours of beauty sleep to go!”

Minnie didn’t respond, a smile still stuck on her face as the two chipmunks darted after the rapidly retreating silhouette of her husband.

“Bet you 1000 munny he’s gone for more than a month.”

Daisy’s black eyes widened in disbelief before adding her own cheering to the ruckus.

“Girl, you are **on**! Momma need a new pair of shoes!”
Chapter Summary

Boy, this was a long one! Over 15000 words in this chapter alone! That being said it was a blast to write, and if you recognise any of the references in this chapter then you have good taste in video games and terrible taste in music

The snow-kissed hill was eerily silent, the only sounds hitting Vanitas ears coming from the crisp crunching of freshly fallen snow beneath his feet. Every breath he took hit his lungs with an icy chill, sinking into his chest and freezing over his already cold, hard heart. Even his breath condensed into puffs of white frost like a dragon protecting its hoard. His toes were already going numb, ice creeping up his calves the longer he stood still. Against the endless expanse of crystal white snow, Vanitas could spot a small town twinkling in the distance at the foot of the hill, the smell of gingerbread and sugar wafting through the air and making his stomach churn in disgust.

“There had better be a good reason to bring me here,” he grumbled, shivering through the layers of crimson fur that hugged his neck and arms. “I know I’m not about to freeze my ass off like this.”

“Of course there is, we’re going to see Santa!”

Vanitas growled at the insufferable excitement bursting from his brother, Ventus jogging on the spot impatiently while he waited for his friends to catch up. Out of all the Guardians of Light, the other part of his heart was bottom of the list for people to be super glued to, even worse than Aqua or Riku. He could respect their desires to murder him and dump his body in a ditch, but Ven was still actively trying to appeal to his good side – a side that didn’t exist. The blonde seemed to have the idea that Vanitas could be ‘reformed’ somehow, that he could be convinced to stay even after Sora’s heart was torn from him. Vanitas had hoped their brief moment of mutual understanding in the Keyblade Graveyard would bring them closer, but it seemed the blonde was now parroting Sora’s misguided beliefs. Seems like some of the brunette had rubbed off on him, despite having been detangled from the webbing of Sora’s heart several months ago.

Even now, he could feel the tendrils of darkness in his heart reaching out to swallow Ven into the black hole in his chest. His half-heart was still yearning for its missing light. Vanitas didn’t know if he would ever be free of its intoxicating call.

“Don’t be so frigid,” Terra insisted, a smirk on his face as Ventus laughed out loud at his pun.

“You’re enjoying my suffering, aren’t you,” Vanitas snarled back.

“Oh, absolutely.”

Vanitas threw him a glare that was acidic enough to melt steel beams, but Terra only responded to his aggressions with coy smile. Aqua’s homicidal rage burned inside her heart like a wildfire, hell-bent on separating Vanitas’ head from his shoulders at the earliest convenience, whereas Terra’s anger smouldered like hot coals. He was in it for the long game, and his promise to Ventus would not prevent him from taking the necessary actions if Vanitas proved to be uncontrollable. It was like pet-sitting a feral wolf.
“What on earth are we all wearing anyway?!” Vanitas exclaimed, pulling on the hem of his jacket like he was hoping it would tear away to reveal his bodysuit underneath. He looked like a damn fool, clothed in a heavy leather jacket with matching shorts, both a dark coal grey and lined with silky red fur. Vanitas could tolerate that part of his attire, but the black Santa hat with matching pompom on his head was one step too far into the realm of tackiness. Also, who the hell wears shorts in the snow?!

At least he had fared better than his unwilling companions. Terra was decked out head to toe as an elf, his suit a dark forest green accented with knee-high candy cane stockings. His outfit was at least more suited to the arctic conditions, wrapped head to toe in thick cotton and his brown hair swept back under a pointy cap. Ventus was barely recognisable behind the plumes of chestnut brown feathers, his torso padded into a round belly and stained red like a robin. The three must’ve looked like a wandering circus with their outrageous getup.

“We still have to maintain the World Order,” Terra lectured, brushing snow off his shoulder as it continued to pepper the trio from above. “There’s only one person in this world who is aware of our true identities, and we needed to keep it that way.”

“Oh yeah, who’s that?”

“SANTA!!” Ventus exploded, infuriated that his friends were taking so long. “Come on guys, it’ll be Christmas before we even get down there!”

The blonde frantically disappeared down the hill towards the village, leaving a trail of mottled brown feathers in his wake. Ven was like a small child in a candy shop, high on sugar even though he was yet to ingest any treats. He must have been almost thirty years old at that point, having spent a solid decade taking a nap inside Sora’s heart, but he still had the vivacity of a toddler. Some things never change.

Vanitas briefly toyed with the idea of making a swift escape while his bodyguards were off playing in the snow, but dismissed the thought before it could take root in his mind. Ventus was being unusually obtuse, running off and leaving his back unprotected while his arch enemy lurked behind him. He could feel the Void Gear itching to sink between his vertebrae, although all that padding in his suit was like wearing riot gear. The blonde’s lack of situational awareness presented the perfect opportunity to slink into the shadows unnoticed, but his charcoal suit would stick out like a sore thumb against the white snow. He would be a sitting duck, or more accurately a sitting robin.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Terra said calmly, placing one hand on Vanitas’ shoulder. “You’re thinking of running away while Ven isn’t watching. That, or you’re going to try and merge with him while his back is turned.”

Vanitas flinched as the hand on his shoulder suddenly tensed against his muscles and sent sparks of pain shooting down his arm. He glanced up at Terra to find the brunette towering above him with a dark, dangerous look in his blue eyes that rivalled the unforgiving iciness of the tundra surrounding them.

“Ven wants to give you a chance, and promised him that I would do the same, but if I catch so much as a whiff of scheming coming from you, I won’t hesitate to take back my promise.”

If Terra thought he could make those scary eyes and intimidate Vanitas into submission, he was going to be sorely disappointed. The height difference left his sharp jawline cast in shade and his voice dripping with malice, but it was hard to take his threats seriously while the sleigh bells on his ivy green cap chimed with every word.
“You’re lecturing me?” Vanitas snarled, repaying Terra’s vicious expression in spades. “Weren’t you enslaved to Xehanort for over ten years?”

“Remind me how long we you enslaved to Xehanort for again?”

Vanitas didn’t grace him with an answer.

Terra released his iron-clad grip on Vanitas shoulder, the red fur lining his jacket dampened with the imprint of his hand, and gestured towards the town in the distance with a fake smile stretched across his face. Vanitas wasn’t a fool – Terra was getting him to go first so he could stalk him from behind in case he tried anything. It was the only smart move he had ever seen the dense brunette make.

Vanitas huffed and stomped past him leaving a trail of disturbed snow in his wake like he was parting a frigid ocean. The path down the hill was obscured by the layers of crystal white snow, but the line of brown feathers left by his brother would guide the way.

Vanitas couldn’t help but feel a little perturbed that Terra had thrown his plan to merge with Ventus into the mix. Before he had been roped into this whole debacle the only thought that would’ve crossed his mind at the sight of that unruly head of blonde hair would be to viciously savage Ventus until he either agreed to join their hearts together, or they were both sent to Kingdom Hearts in a final blaze of glory. The only desire raging in his half-heart at that very moment was for escape from the living ball-and-chains that were the Guardians of Light.

Perhaps he had spent too much time listening to their monologues about the power of light and just wanted rid of them, but the ideology he had so fervently stuck to was the last thing on his mind. The Vanitas that was part of the Seekers of Darkness was created for the sole purpose of destroying Ventus in order to form the $\chi$-blade and had no other motivation to keep powering through the pain of losing his Unversed. The entire purpose of his existence was to end it. Sure, the prospect of becoming whole and going out on his own terms still tasted like the sweetest honey to his shrivelled heart, but he couldn’t help but feel like it had gone on the backburner.

That was fine, there was no rush: he should focus on ditching Sora first. Vanitas could come back for his brother’s head later, when he was at full power and not wearing a Santa hat.

You’ve gone soft.

The sickly saccharine smell that had tortured his nostrils only became more overpowering the closer his feet took his to the town. A bakery had its wooden shutters open allowing the smell of sweet mince pies to drift through the air, tiny elves no taller than Vanitas’ shin scurrying around like ants with baskets full of delectable treats. Two elves were making maple syrup taffy in a heap of snow, pouring the molten gold liquid onto the pile and quickly rolling it up with wooden Popsicle sticks before it solidified into amber shards. None of them gave Vanitas a second glance, so absorbed in their work that the trio dragging their legs through the snow might as well have been spectres in the night.

At least Vanitas wasn’t being stared at. That was a nice change.

Ventus stood at the front door of a huge wooden manor glazed with fresh snow and adorned with miles of twinkling lights like stars in the sky above. He frantically waved like his arm was about to fall off before disappearing inside, leaving a trail of white powdery footprints behind him as the fresh snow clung to every surface. Guess Ventus never learned any manners during his coma. Vanitas continued his saunter towards the building, feeling Terra’s eyes burning a hole in the back of his head. The path down the hill opened up to a large plaza, the grand manor at the foot of the path like a monument and a brightly coloured carousel in the middle. Funny, the elves were giving the carousel an awfully wide berth considering this was their home…
“Don’t touch that if you like having all your fingers intact.”

Vanitas did like having his fingers intact. He decided not to touch the carousel.

He hopped up the short steps to the door that Ventus had disappeared into, brushing his hands over his shoulders and scattering loose snow all around him. He might be about to get frostbite from the knees down, but at least he was given a pair of gloves. Vanitas wiped his boots on a door mat engraved with the words “My other sleigh is a Lamborghini’ and stepped inside. His face was immediately battered with a blast of heat, the crackling of a roaring fireplace just around the corner sinking into his bones and casting off the chill that had dug its fangs into his legs. He could feel his face flush a rosy pink. Terra sneezed behind him.

“Oh, that must be the others” a voice boomed from the next room, filled with as much warmth as the house itself. “Please, do come in, and shut the door behind you! You’re letting out all the warmth.”

Terra immediately broke out into a genuine grin at the sound of the hearty voice, closing the door behind him with a soft click and sealing the cold outside where it had no power. Vanitas tentatively stuck his head around the corner, feeling the once welcoming warmth meld into an unbearable heat as his fur-lined jacket trapped the hot air like he was in a sauna. The deep red carpet beneath his feet sucked away all remnants of moisture as feeling returned to his stinging toes, the smell of sugar now overlaid with pine and chestnuts. He rounded the corner to find Ventus’ eagerly conversing with an old man in grandiose armchair, white beard almost glazing the floor and suit just as red as his own cold-flushed cheeks.

“I-Is that Santa?!” Vanitas balked. “You weren’t kidding about him?!”

“Ah, you must be Vanitas, correct?” Santa questioned, sitting up in his chair slightly. “Wonderful to meet you, although I wish it could have been under better circumstances.”

Vanitas didn’t really know what to say. This was actual, goddamn, bona fide, motherfucking Santa Claus sitting in front of him like they were talking about the weather. The Saint Nick, sneaking down chimneys and stealing cookies since 1823, was chatting with Ventus in his gingerbread mansion. Vanitas had seen a lot of things in his time – furries that ran factories, French people trying to burn gypsies alive – but something about that floor length white beard and crimson red suit left him completely speechless.

Santa Claus. Now he had seen everything.

“Wait a sec,” Vanitas stammered out finally. “You didn’t confuse me with Sora?”

Santa let out a deep booming laugh and pushed himself out of his chair, wincing as his old bones groaned with the movement.

“Oh course not, my lad!” he exclaimed. “Why, it doesn’t take much to tell that you are very different people! Now, did you come to find out if you’ve made it off my naughty list yet?”

Vanitas blinked in confusion. He had been told so many times by everyone that surrounded him that his existence was invariably tied to Sora’s, he had almost begun to believe it himself. Even now, garbed in a ridiculous costume instead of his muscle suit, Santa was able to look past his appearance and see what lay inside. Could the old man see into his heart, see the parts of him that weren’t quite Ventus and weren’t quite Sora, but were in fact something unique?

Vanitas suddenly felt very vulnerable.
Ventus used the lull in Vanitas’ sarcastic attitude to jump into the conversation, hopping from foot to foot as if Santa had forgotten he was even there. After all those years of Aqua and Terra telling him that Santa wasn’t real and it was actually them sneaking his presents under the tree while he slept, the blonde relished the opportunity to meet his lifelong idol. Something about the jolly look that twinkled in Santa’s eye was enough to send even the most stalwart cynic into fits of childish glee, and Ventus was no exception.

“Ventus, you ask me every time!” Santa guffawed. “You’re on the nice list every year!”

Vanitas rolled his eyes. Ven literally had no darkness in his heart, not until he finally wore his brother down enough and got him to merge back together. The blonde was a literal ray of sunshine, although not impervious to the occasional stormy clouds: he sometimes wondered if Sora and Ven made better brothers than Ven and himself.

“I want a PS4 pleeeeeease!” Ventus begged, much to the horror of Terra who had been watching with a small smile at his friend’s joy. Vanitas couldn’t stop a barking laugh from slipping through at the mortified expression on the brunette’s face at the blonde’s begging.

“And what about you, Terra?” Santa smiled, ignoring the pleading from Ventus. “Are you finally going to let me tell you if you’ve gotten off the naughty list?”

Terra? On the naughty list?! Vanitas’ head snapped up at the brunette, now standing with a very embarrassed look on his face and bells chiming as he rubbed the back of his head. Sure, he had allowed the darkness to take over his heart, fused with Xehanort to form Terra-Xehanort, tried to murder everyone multiple times…

OK, perhaps it wasn’t such a farfetched idea as he had first thought.

“No thank you,” Terra replied sheepishly, avoiding the judging gaze of the black-haired Keyblade wielder next to him. “I’m not ready to know if I made the cut yet.”

Santa smiled gently and nodded as if he had been expecting such a reply. His interactions with Terra were admittedly fleeting but he already knew everything there was to know about Terra’s history, written in cursive on his lists by an invisible author. If only he knew that the thing keeping Terra from his rightful place alongside his peers on the nice list was Terra himself. The brunette refused to allow himself to accept the forgiveness that his friends had offered him, believing that he still needed to atone for his actions under Xehanort’s influence. It was not Santa’s place to push such a realisation on him, no matter how frustrating it was to watch Terra beat himself up over something he had already paid the price for time and time again. That realisation would need to come from his own heart.

“Oh, and let’s not forget Sora!” Santa exclaimed, turning back around and grabbing his list from the cabinet next to his chair. “I haven’t seen you in a long time. Let’s see where you stand…”

Santa pretended to very slowly peruse his list, checking each name one by one even though he already knew where Sora’s name lay. Sora clasped his hands together in excitement; the last time he had visited Santa Claus he sealed his own fate by admitting he didn’t believe in the wise old man, not after Riku told him he didn’t exist. Boy, would he love to see the look on his face right now! Once he got his own body back, he just had to drag Riku and Kairi out here and shove snowballs down their clothes.

“Well, well…” Santa mused. “It says here that you misused the Power of Waking! Oh dear, that’s
“Very naughty…”

“What?!” Sora yelled, head in his hands at the revelation. “I’m on the naughty list AGAIN? Give me a break!”

Santa chuckled at his explosion, reminded of how the brunette had reacted the first he had been told he was on the naughty list. Sora had no idea, but he had never strayed from the nice list once; Santa just couldn’t help but tease the naïve boy. Most children cast away their belief in his power once they reached his age, so speaking with someone who was still very much a child at heart was a rare gift. Sora was such an expressive boy that for a moment he almost forgot that the face in front of him was not Sora himself.

“I’m only joking, Sora,” he laughed. “You’re right here.”

Santa held out his list for the trio to see, Sora grabbing either side of the parchment and desperately scouring the parchment with his face barely inches from the surface. Sure enough, as his yellow eyes grazed the cursive letters they lit up in stunning gold as if the ink was moving across the page like caterpillars. There he was, right beneath someone called ‘Ephemer’ whose ink was so old and faded that it was barely legible. Huh. Wonder who that is.

“Yes!” Sora yelled, jumping in the air with one fist in the air in celebration. He and Ventus exchanged high-fives so hard that it made their palms sting.

“So, we never got to ask about Vanitas,” Terra chuckled, watching the two brothers under his care celebrate. “Although, we probably know the answer to that. Is it possible to be on the naughty list more than once?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Santa remarked, much to Sora’s surprise. “You’d have to be a terribly rotten apple to accomplish that, though. Look, Xehanort is on here thirteen times!”

Santa flipped his list over, the unbelievably long parchment having names written on both sides. As he turned the paper to the other side the names changed from ‘nice’ to ‘naughty’, a lot more convenient than having two separate lists. He pointed to a set of names with one red glove, the names also turning gold as the spectators gazed upon them.

XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT
XEHANORT

Huh, one for each clone. Go figure.

Sora opened his mouth to continue probing about Vanitas’ status when the room vibrated with a sudden loud crash. Sora could feel the air sucked back up into his lungs at the calamity, the sounds of something heavy banging against the floor and metal scraping against each other made him jump in
fright, followed by three smaller and lighter impacts. His first instinct was the Heartless, or Heaven forbid Oogie Boogie had dragged himself back up from the depths of hell for round three, but if the Heartless were running rampant then the elves outside wouldn’t have been going about their daily business…

“Oh, confound it Jack, that had better not be you back there again!” Santa yelled; his jolly persona replaced by one of a scolding father. “I thought I told you to keep your phalanges off my presents!”

He placed his list back down on his chair and shuffled towards the door to the Toy Factory, his old bones not carrying him as quickly as they used to and complaining loudly with every step. Santa was becoming unfortunately familiar with the Pumpkin King breaking into his home looking for ‘inspiration’ and leaving with his arms full of empty presents. For some reason, Jack was far more interested in the wrapping itself rather than the treasures they held within the colourful paper and satin bows. If the skeleton had begun to pilfer actual toys then Santa would have to start installing electric fences. Kids toys seemed to get more and more expensive every year!

Sora, Ventus and Terra exchanged identical looks of determination and followed Santa close by, their Keyblade hands twitching ready for combat. Neither the Heartless or Nobodies had proven to be much of a nuisance since the Organization had crumbled to the ground, but they couldn’t rule out the possibility of a rogue legion of Shadows. Plus, Oogie Boogie was still at large, the sack of sentient bugs reforming every time they slew him as long as he had his linen sack within reach. Sora really wanted to go back outside and help the elves, ahem, ‘dispose’ of their excess candy before Vanitas could stop him, but leaving the source of the commotion to its business would place them all in danger. The little people would happily walk off a cliff if it wasn’t for Santa keeping them on such a tight leash.

Whatever he was expecting to see in Shipping and Receiving, this wasn’t it.

The place was trashed. The elves didn’t do too good of a job keeping things in order as they should, and Santa was getting too old to bend over and pick toy parts off the floor without slipping a disk in his back, but this was on a whole ‘nother level. Unfinished presents were scattered everywhere, covering most of the floor and one dusty conveyer belt, spilling out of the cardboard boxes they were kept in. Stray teddy bears and baby dolls looked up with glass eyes as they lay discarded, covered by strands of tinsel that had been wrapped around a window pane as if used as a rope. In the middle of the room, a large pink and green striped present shuffled around slowly, as if something was trapped inside.

This wasn’t the work of Jack Skellington, this was a break in!

Before Sora could react, the giant wandering present was suddenly tossed onto its side by whatever was trapped beneath its weight, revealing the perpetrators. Three children, tall enough only to kick his shins in and clad in shiny plastic Halloween masks, brushed themselves off while complaining loudly that the tinsel they had used as a rope had torn and dropped them in the factory before they were ready, the pile of presents cushioning their fall and smothering the floor in the process. As they dusted themselves off, the three finally noticed the trio of bewildered Keyblade wielders staring at them incredulously, accompanied by a now extremely annoyed Santa Claus.

“You three!” Santa bellowed, his usually soft voice now a booming bellow. “This is the third time this month!”

“Busted!”

The three gremlins scampered away from each other as the Keyblade wielders descended upon them, ready to snatch them up before they could escape. Sora made a running leap right at Shock, her
witch mask cackling back at him even as she shook in her boots, but before he could trap the little
goblin he was smacked in the fact by a present, tossed by Ventus who had hoped to use the kids
mess against them. This was followed by profuse apologising and Shock running away while
screeching at the top of her lungs. Terra followed suit, using his Keyblade like a golf club and
swinging it into a few remaining intact presents, the boxes toppling towards the kids but just
narrowly missing them. When did they get so fast?!

“Quickly!” Shock yelled as Barrel linked his fingers together to give her a boost. She jumped off his
hands and grabbed the tail end of the tinsel rope, clambering up it and out of reach. Lock hurriedly
followed suit, leaving Barrel to flail around on the ground on his own before his fingers finally
brushed the edge of the tinsel and he pulled himself up. Even his smiling skeleton mask wasn’t
enough to hide the stab of fright in his eyes as his two friends left him to the dogs.

“Haha!” Lock mocked, his finger and thumb in the shape of an L on his forehead. “Try again,
losers, you’re too slow!”

“Yeah, besides we already got what we came for!” Shock shrieked, holding up a string of twinkling
fairy lights she had wrapped around her shoulders like a lasso. On second glance, all three of the
brats were carrying metres of lights in every colour of the rainbow. But why would they break in just
to steal lights of all things?

“Return those immediately!” Santa commanded, only to be laughed at by the kids now that they had
the high ground.

“Nuh-uh! Oogie Boogie would kill us if we-“

Lock punched Barrel in the face before he could spill the beans to the Keyblade wielders, the sound
of his yelling muffled as he landed face down in the snow outside. Lock and Shock snickered to
each other as they tormented the boy; just because their mission was complete didn’t mean they
couldn’t have fun!

Vanitas growled and picked up a loose present by his foot. He was allowed to be a snarky asshole,
but these brats needed a boot up their ass. Time to partake in his favourite pastime: beating up
children! He revved his arm up and lobbed the present at the jeering kids, smacking Lock straight in
the red devil mask with a satisfying thunk. Shame, he picked up an empty present, would have been
way more satisfying if a heavy toy had been stuffed inside, like hiding a rock inside a snowball. The
impact knocked Lock backwards out of the open window but not before he grabbed onto Shock’s
dress, dragging her down with him. Two more satisfying thumps followed as the two joined their
friend in the snow pile outside.

“Take that you little SHITS!” Vanitas triumphantly spat at the window. Terra covered Ventus’ ears
with his hands at the swearing.

“Confound it all, look at my warehouse!”

Oh, right. Perhaps they had gotten a little too carried away with their brawling, but it wasn’t like they
had made the factory floor any worse. A few elves had been drawn by the commotion and were
slowly picking up some of the discarded presents, albeit at a snail’s pace. Santa could only look at
the destruction with his head in his hands. Thank God Christmas wasn’t around the corner this time,
or they would all be on the naughty list! Still, he would need to pull some serious overtime to make
up for all these toys – he just wouldn’t feel right delivering damaged goods to the eager children that
awaited his presence once a year. Christmas was too special for that.
“So, uhh…” Vanitas muttered, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Guess we should go and chase after them?”

“Aww man,” Ventus groaned, disappointment clouding his blue eyes. “We can never just celebrate Christmas in peace.”

“Christmas isn’t for another six months!”

Terra cast one eye out of the factory floor, looked at Santa’s distraught face, and hurriedly ushered the two boys he was effectively babysitting out the door.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get those fairy lights back for you! We’ll be back before sunrise!”

“Terra, I don’t think he cares about the lights,” Ventus whispered to him, pulling Terra’s head down to his level so not to be overheard.

“I know, but we’ve already made things worse with our ‘help’, ” he whispered back, getting a mouthful of robin feathers from Ventus’ costume. Thankfully his intuition was correct. The first thing that greeted the trio was a pile of snow with three distinct craters, each petering off into a line of tiny footprints that led out of town and back up the hill. The kids were smart enough to get out of dodge before Vanitas could finish what they had started, but the long lines in the snow must’ve come from the trail of fairy lights as they dragged the decorations behind them.

“Wow, they must really want those lights if they’re still hauling them around…” Ventus mused. “I’m a little concerned that they mentioned Oogie Boogie, though. Hopefully it’s just a slip of the tongue…

“Come on, let’s track ‘em down!” Vanitas smirked. “I may not care about Christmas, but even I can get in the Holiday spirits if it involves punching someone in the face!”

Vanitas took a deep breath, the crisp autumn air flowing into his lungs and filling his head with the smell of fresh dirt and pine needles.

“Now this is a world I can get behind!”

He had been admittedly suspicious when the trio had dragged themselves back up Yuletide Hill following the scurrying footprints of the three gremlins he had punted out the window, only to be shoved headfirst through a pumpkin-shaped door in a tree. The trapdoor had dumped him in the middle of a forest of withered trees, branches lacking any greenery and wood dry and cracking with age. It was a far cry from the overly saccharine atmosphere of Christmas Town, the air heavy with a sense of despair that sunk into his bones.

It was way more his style.

If the last town had dedicated itself to Christmas, then perhaps this world was obsessed with Halloween? He could see a graveyard peeking at him through the dead trees, stone gargoyles staring him down and gravestones lining a winding path into the depths of the woods. This world was really going hard on attempting to scare him, but honestly? This was just Vanitas’ aesthetic.

“I thought you’d say that!” Ventus laughed, popping out of the tree behind him.

Vanitas turned around to make sure his brother wasn’t about to stab him in the back, only to shriek in
fear and jump several feet backwards. That wasn’t Ventus! That was a rotted corpse! Vanitas took a
couple more steps backwards as the zombie shuffled towards him with half its green skin sloughed
off to revealed yellow bones beneath and a deep black void where one eye would be. He
instinctively summoned the Void Gear into his right hand, concerned that this was some kind of
deformed Heartless ready to steal the tiny sliver of heart he had left.

“Back the fuck off, monster!” Vanitas barked, hackles raised. “I’ll send you back to the depths of
hell where you came from!”

“Whoa, whoa! Easy!” the zombie insisted, raising both hands in a show of submission. “It’s me!
Ventus! I did technically die twice, remember?”

Vanitas squinted his eyes; those blue eyes filled with jovial mirth and messy blonde hair were
awfully familiar, and the warm smile that creased the monster’s eyes had held his gaze many times
before. He slowly lowered his Keyblade as another being hopped out of the Christmas tree shaped
door before it unceremoniously slammed shut behind them. As it stood upright it towered over the
other two, clad head to toe in shiny silver armour and a jet of yellow fire shooting out of its neck
where the head should be. The actual head was tucked under one arm, wearing a helmet with its face
plate up so the identity of the knight could be seen, looking at the two with a calm expression like it
was out for a morning stroll.

“Boo.”

“Very funny, Terra,’’ Ventus chuckled at the dullahan, who returned the smile. “I think we’ve given
Vanitas a fright.”

“Huh, that makes a nice change for once,” Terra replied. “My eyes are down here, Vanitas.”

Vanitas blinked himself out of his shock, his yellow eyes fixated on the towering pyre of flame
coming from the knight’s open neck before snapping back down to Terra’s head. That was going to
take some getting used to. Hang on, if this is what Terra and Ventus look like in this world, then…

Vanitas looked down at his own form to see himself garbed in something that was thankfully not
another Santa costume. He was grateful that he wasn’t some kind of undead abomination like his
brother, but those dirty red short and faded yellow shoes seemed awfully familiar…

“You have got to be kidding me!” he yelled, brushing his hands across face to find a mask in the
form of a Shadow covering his left eye. “What kind of cruel joke is this?!”

“Guess we know that you would go as Sora to a Halloween party!” Ven replied, his relaxed grin a
little out of place on his gaunt features.

“This is bullshit.”

“It’s hilarious,” Terra agreed. “Just remember the World Order. This is completely normal for
Halloween Town, in fact, they’d probably find out normal appearances to be the most frightening.
Let’s just keep following those footprints.”

Vanitas rolled his eyes and accepted his fate. He was past the point of trying to apply logic to these
worlds; better to just roll with the punches and get it over with before his remaining brain cells
clocked out for the day. The brats’ footprints continued down the path to the cemetery, although they
were much more difficult to follow without the snow on the ground to leave their trail through.
Those kids must be in the area somewhere, and Vanitas was very much looking forward to throwing
them out of more windows.
As Terra and Ventus trotted down the path, Terra’s heavy armour clunking with each movement but not weighing down his shoulders, Vanitas paused and quickly pulled out his Gummiphone. He activated the Camera app and took a selfie of him with the two apprentices in the background, Ventus’ sickly skin looking particularly gloomy under the overcast sky and Terra’s hair a bird’s nest from being held under one arm. His own face peeked up from the bottom of the photo, his single yellow right eye glowing with an unnatural vibrancy as the Heartless mask cast a shadow over his forehead, and sent it to the group chat.

aoSora: look ven is fckn ded lol
aoSora: Fs in the chat bois
notanobody: f
soHotImOnFire: f
Riku: F
Master_Aqua: What is going on?
white_witch: f
Master_Aqua: Why is everyone saying ‘f’? What am I missing?
number_imaginary: f
soHotImOnFire: this is so sad alexa play don’t think twice
[NOW PLAYING: Don’t Think Twice – Utada Hikaru (2019) 00:00 ►-------- 4:34]
Luna_Diviner: WHY IS THAT A COMMAND
Luna_Diviner: HOW DO I TURN IT OFF
white_witch: oh i like this song
notanobody: this is my JAM
Riku: AXEL I WILL REPLACE YOUR TOOTHPASTE WITH SUPER GLUE FOR THIS
soHotImOnFire: lmaoooooo
soHotImOnFire: perish
Master_Aqua: As soon as I can figure out how to turn this off, I’m coming after you.
Master_Aqua: Prepare yourself to meet your maker.

Vanitas quickly locked the phone as the music began, a single guitar chord leaking out from the speaker before he could silence the singer. Terra had made it clear he didn’t need much of an opportunity to whale on the black-haired boy, and discovering that he had been snapping photos behind their back would only secure him a one-way ticket to the Realm of Darkness.

As the three stepped into the graveyard, the dreary grey sky suddenly lit up with a huge bolt of lightning streaking down from the storm clouds overhead. Vanitas was blinded for a second, afterimages burned into his retinas as the flash took over every aspect of his vision before colliding with a building in the distance. Sparks shot from the shingle roof as the electricity pulsed down a lightning rod into the maw of the house, a deep rumble of thunder reverberating through the stale air and making the hairs on his neck stand on end with the residual static.

“… Whoa…”

“Isn’t that Jack’s house?” Ventus queried, rubbing his eye to clear his vision. “Should we go check and see if everything’s OK?”

“But, what about the footprints?” Vanitas replied, gesturing towards the fading trail that tapered off through a set of twisted metal gates. “Are we gonna let those little brats get the best of us?!”

“Oh, those three aren’t as bad as they think they are,” Terra grinned. “Besides, if we’re trying to trigger Sora’s memories, then making a little detour won’t hurt.”

Vanitas couldn’t argue with that logic. He hadn’t forgotten about Sora’s little excursion in his body.
when speaking to Santa, although his gut feeling was telling him that something was off. In almost every situation the two had found themselves in, the switch between hearts had been preceded by a painful flashback, like the two were watching a movie together and one kept getting up to use the bathroom. When Sora had spoken with Santa no such thing had occurred, no struggling between the two hearts for dominance, no reliving memories that were better left forgotten. Vanitas couldn’t shake the feeling that the two were becoming a little too comfortable with their unorthodox arrangement.

As the three approached the town the smell of smoke and cinder hit his nostrils and the sounds of coughing and spluttering filled the air. The town was like a gothic portrait, trapped in a moment in time with its rickety houses stacked like dominoes and winding streets leading to nowhere. The picturesque view was obscured behind a thick cloud of smog that was engulfing the town, spewing out of the windows of the house struck by lightning. Vanitas fanned the air in front of his face and climbed the steps of the house in question, opening the door and standing to one side to allow the backdraft of soot to pass him before entering. Ventus and Terra weren’t as lucky, taking the blast to the face as they followed after him. Vanitas took great joy in watching them rub soot and dust out of their eyes before stepping inside the building.

“SORA! Oh, it’s been so long!”

Vanitas was swept up several feet in the air before he could react by an extremely tall and lanky skeleton wearing a pinstripe suit. His combat instincts told him to summon his Keyblade and fight back, but his arms were pinned to his sides as the skeleton gave him an enthusiastic hug, pointy bones jabbing into his flesh from every angle. Vanitas let out a yelp as the creature swung him around like they were doing a tango, the skeleton rubbing its skull against his face like a dog greeting its owner.

“Someone help!” Vanitas yelled as the skeleton’s grip tightened. “It has no concept of personal space!”

“Jack, please put Vanitas down,” Terra asked calmly, opening the door fully and letting Ventus scoot under his arm and out of the cold. “He’s going to throw up.”

Jack abruptly ceased his excited spinning at Terra’s words to see that the boy in his arms had gone a worrying shade of green and lowered Vanitas to the ground before he could follow through on Terra’s warning. The skeleton was so tall he needed to bend his legs to avoid dropping Vanitas as he staggered away, head still spinning and stomach churning.

“Oh my, I do apologise!” Jack begged. “I confused you with a dear friend of mine. Why, I haven’t seen him in so long I must’ve forgotten what he looks like!”

“Actually, this is Vanitas,” Ventus explained, putting one hand on Vanitas’s shoulder to steady him. “He’s… uhh… Sora’s twin brother?”

Vanitas gave Ventus a glare so steeped in malice that he would’ve burned a hole straight through his skull. The only response he received was a whispered “Do you want to explain your situation?” to which he supposed his brother had a point. Attempting to explain his unique relationship to Sora was more trouble than it was worth, especially considering there were still some aspects that he hadn’t wrapped his head around himself. He was desperate to free himself of the constant comparisons to his brown-haired doppelganger, but he could tolerate the infuriating comparisons for the time being.

“Oh wow, a second set of twins?” Jack exclaimed. “They must really run in your family!”

Vanitas was momentarily confused at the statement, trying to imagine just how many Sora’s there
really were in their ramshackle family, before realising that the skeleton was referring to Ventus and Roxas. Guess this wasn’t the first time the Guardians had used this excuse. He couldn’t blame them – Vanitas was one of the examples and even he didn’t fully understand why everyone looked identical.

“Is everything alright?” Terra probed, noting the large equipment that extended from floor to ceiling and was connected to the lightning rod seen on the roof. “We saw the house get struck by lightning.”

“No, everything is not alright! My experiment was a failure!”

The dense cloud of smoke parted like stage curtains to reveal a scrawny man in a wheelchair, his skin a pale grey from lack of sunlight and stick-thin arms clad in black rubber gloves piloting the chair around with a joystick. He briefly removed his safety goggles to reveal beady black eyes beneath, rubbed them to clear the lenses from the residue of the explosion, and slid them back on his face.

“I’m still trying to perfect my recipe for creating the perfect heart, and the lightning was to spark life into the vessel, but even after all these attempts it’s still missing something!” he declared, rocking his chair around in frustration. He was awfully energetic for someone confined to a wheelchair.

“Oh, that’s right!” Jack exclaimed after a moment of thought, his eye sockets widening in realisation and rubbing his chin with his bony fingers. “If the three of you are here, perhaps you can help us! I’m still hoping that we can get the Heartless to dance in the next Halloween if we can just perfect the recipe for a heart; do you have any thoughts on what ingredients we might be missing?”

Vanitas tore his golden eyes away from the lanky skeleton to check out the equipment. A rusty metal operating table lay in the centre of the room, surrounded by exposed wires and signs of scorch marks on the floor radiating out like veins. A huge mechanical arm rested above with the barrel of a laser pointed down, aiming at a pulsating yellow heart encased with a sturdy looking lock. He reached out with a pointed finger and jabbed the heart, wincing as it squelched with the motion. Gross.

“I’ve collected all the necessary ingredients for the perfect heart!” Dr Finkelstein ranted with fervour. “Terror from a tarantula, darkness from squid ink, disgust from sewage water, everything listed in my book, but nothing works!”

The mad scientist threw his hands up in defeat. Were they putting all these bizarre things into this fake heart and zapping it in the hopes it would come to life? And they were going to give it to a Heartless?! If their hypothesis was correct and this abominable brew would actually result in a living, beating heart then wasting it on a lowly Shadow was nothing short of blasphemy. Vanitas would kill for the opportunity to be gifted his own heart, finally freeing himself from the half that still remained within Ventus’ body. The thought of a pathetic Shadow scurrying off with such a treasure made his veins run cold.

But really, if a heart was created in a lab, could it even be considered a ‘heart’ at all?

Hiro took a few tentative steps forward, his boots crunching heavily against the shattered paving from Baymax’s fall. Even though his face was shielded by his helmet, he was grateful that his friends were standing behind him so they couldn’t witness the grief on his face. He could feel the lump in his throat, hear the blood rushing in his ears at the sight of his fallen friend. Even in such a corrupted state, encased with vicious purple armour and Darkubes covering one arm like a tumour, his heart could still imagine the warm white robot that lay underneath.

“Safety mode kicks in if he’s put under too much stress, so he’s probably just in stasis,” he said,
keeping his voice as steady as he could manage. “We’ll have to destroy the chip if we want to be certain.”

Hiro ignored the protesting from his friends at his statement, reaching across the robot’s inactive form and pushing down on the dull bronze cap protecting Baymax’s personality chip. The deep purple armour was covered in scratches like it had been clawed at by an animal, tiny strips of pure white peeking through. The cap depressed in at his touch and ejected the chip. Hiro could feel his skin tingling through his thick gloves as he took the memory board in his hand, rivulets of darkness bleeding off the chip like a miasma.

“It’s the right thing to do.”

He allowed himself a small smile before the Darkubes sloughed themselves away as the chip was removed, the source of the corruption purged from Baymax’s system. The corrupted data faded away like distorted snowflakes taking the purple and fuchsia armour with it, revealing Baymax in his true form. Even after everything he had been through, sacrificing himself to the darkness to save Hiro from the out-of-control Microbots, he still appeared identical to the friend he had left behind. His eyes were closed as if in deep sleep, but Hiro knew that if he was allowed to reboot himself there was nothing stopping the robot from regaining his strength and going on another rampage. This Baymax may physically resemble the original, but there was no doubt in his mind that the personality that lay within couldn’t be further from the understanding and selfless robot his brother had created for him.

“But Hiro,” Sora pleaded. “Isn’t that Baymax’s heart?”

Hiro supposed the brunette was correct. It wasn’t a perfect comparison, but even though Baymax’s personality was artificial - a series of ones and zeros determining his every move and restricted to a strict code gifted to him by Tadashi instead of earned himself - that didn’t make it any less true. After all, his own actions were a produce of his brain signals; just because one resulted from electrical circuits and one was purely organic didn’t reduce the importance of the other.

“It’s OK,” Hiro replied, placing one hand against his chest and feeling his own heart beating in return. “Baymax is here.”

The lump in his throat tripled in size as a tear threatened to squeeze out of his eye at the admission. Baymax wasn’t the only one who lived on inside his heart – Tadashi did so too. Hiro didn’t know if he would ever receive closure for his brother’s death, but the least he could do was to keep his memory alive inside his heart. Tadashi was never truly gone while he was remembered by those who loved him. Hiro didn’t want to consider the possibility of losing the last piece of his brother that remained, the piece that lived on inside Baymax’s coding, but he knew it’s what Tadashi would want from him. He wanted to remember his brother as he was when he was alive, but this version of Baymax was no longer loyal to that memory. It was better left forgotten.

“I should be the one.”

Hiro took a deep breath and finally clenched his fist, crushing the mother board in his palm into dust. He hoped it would be enough for Baymax to be free from the corruption that had turned him against his friends.
Hiro just prayed that one day, Baymax would be able to forgive him. Perhaps he just needed to find the strength to forgive himself first.

“Still hanging in there?”

Vanitas let out the breath he had been holding as Terra placed his free hand on his shoulder and gently shook him, snapping him out of his trance. The flashbacks seemed to be linked to Sora’s heart – perhaps it was a sign that they were making progress with reinforcing his memories. Strange, the other flashbacks had left him with a sense of insurmountable exhaustion, but the only side effect that plagued Vanitas there and then was a vicious migraine. Seems like they were getting more tolerable, although he wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

“Yeah, just thinking,” he mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose as the headache slowly faded. Terra raised an eyebrow from his head’s position under his arm, but said nothing at the lie. “Could something like this be used to help Sora? I mean, using specific ‘ingredients’ to heal his heart?”

“I’m, uhh… not sure if using tarantulas and sewage water will help him much…” Terra mused. “I see your point, though. We’ve managed to create hearts from data before, but never a physical one. This is a really interesting experiment, I bet Ienzo would love to get his hands on this data.”

“It’s useless if the data is incomplete!” Dr Finkelstein barked. “The only thing I can think that it’s missing would be light, but everyone knows that the heart is all darkness!”

Any traces of Vanitas’ pounding headache were immediately eliminated at the mad scientist’s words. Every lecture he had been forced to endure – whether it was from the Guardians of Light or Xehanort himself – stated that the heart was equal parts darkness and light, like yin and yang. After all, a shadow couldn’t exist without a light to cast it. The only exceptions were Vanitas and Ventus, but their situation wasn’t exactly the norm, their hearts artificially comprised of one element without the other due to Xehanort’s meddling. Maybe in this world, the heart really was purely darkness. That was an existential question he wasn’t prepared to tackle.

“We were chasing some two-bit brats around before: they’d stolen some fairy lights from Santa’s workshop and mentioned someone called ‘Oogie Boogie’?”

Jack’s face morphed into one of anger at the mention of that name, an expression that Vanitas was surprised to see didn’t suit his skeleton features. Perhaps it was because the Pumpkin King had already swung him around in a bear hug, but he would have expected such a dark expression to fit right into place on his exposed bone face.

“Oh, not him again!” Jack complained. “Why is it that every scheme always leads back to that bag of bugs?! What could he even be doing with fairy li- wait, did you say fairy lights?”

The sour expression was immediately dropped for one of unadulterated fascination, as if the skeleton had never encountered such a thing before. His fingers writhed in excitement as he imagined holding the tiny stars in his hands, strung together with such delicate wire like spider webs. Even the smallest light would still burn like the sun when added to such a dark brew.

“That would be perfect for the experiment!” he declared. “I must insist I accompany you! Who knows what Oogie has done to his manor now!”

One thing that Vanitas was coming to accept about Sora’s acquaintances was their tendencies to drop everything to follow the insistent call of adventure. Jack hadn’t asked for any details, didn’t want to know why they were in Santa’s Workshop, didn’t question why Sora had an ’identical twin’ that he just never mentioned. He was beginning to wonder if the brunet’s hapless faith was a trait he
shared with his friends, or if he merely surrounded himself with similarly-minded fools. Xehanort could’ve probably just asked Sora to help him form the $\chi$-blade and he would’ve freely obliged with a smile. Vanitas really needed to teach his brother how to say ‘no’.

“What, right now?” he asked, still unsure if the Pumpkin King was being serious.

“Of course! What better time to go on an adventure!” Jack replied, puffing his chest out in a show of bravado and making his ribcage poke through the fibres of the pinstripe suit. “Besides, if you’re Sora’s brother then we’re already friends! Oh, this’ll be so fun!”

Terra and Ventus tried to hide their giggles behind their hands as Jack ruffled Vanitas’ inky black hair, leaving it in a worse tangled mess than ever before. Vanitas couldn’t shift the surprise from his face, unsure whether to be flattered or flabbergasted at Jack’s blasé outlook on life. The skeleton had no idea of his true identity, other than his appearance and his word, and yet he was willing to charge into battle alongside him with no consideration for the consequences. It was nice to finally meet someone who wasn’t going for his throat with a butchers knife for once, but was it his connection to Sora that had deemed him so trustworthy? Or was it something else?

Vanitas never had someone unequivocally trust him before… It felt good.

Terra couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being led into a trap.

Granted, he wasn’t the best at telling when he was being manipulated. His decade long servitude under Ansem as his Heartless Guardian was proof enough of that. He was too trusting, too desperate to see the light in the heart of even the worst villain, even when that light was long extinguished. For too many people were ready to take advantage of his trusting nature, obfuscating their true intentions to get him to do things that ultimately caused more harm than good. It was a lesson he had been forced to learn, and wouldn’t soon forget.

Out of the four picking their way through the thorny underbrush, the one with the best eye for bullshit was Vanitas – not that Terra would ever offer him a compliment to his face. The two shared at least one thing in common – they had both been pawns in the dangerous chess game Xehanort played with the universe. Vanitas might have joined the Seekers of Darkness by his own will, but he was resolute that he had no fealty to the old man. He would draw his Keyblade and strike Xehanort down without a second thought if he thought it would get him closer to merging with Ventus.

His determination would be commendable, if it wasn’t for the fact that he was trying to kill one of Terra’s best friends.

Terra was surprising to find that Vanitas hadn’t pulled any shady stunts yet. He had been anticipating a Keyblade in his back and at least one escape attempt by now, and for all Vanitas had suffered through everything with a sour look on his face he was still being compliant. Kairi and Xion had reported something similar – he was a condescending prick but was fully cooperative and even managed to fight alongside them when they faced a swarm of Heartless. Terra took the information with a pinch of salt, not that he thought his friends were being dishonest. Sora had already demonstrated his ability to seize control of the body he was trapped inside with little notice, although not for as long as anyone would like, so the prospect of the brunette preventing Vanitas from attacking his friends or even just turning and running away was not off the cards.

Still, Vanitas was within touching distance of the other half of his heart. Ventus was the sole reason the black-haired boy kept dragging himself back up from the depths of Hell where he belonged, and
it would be so easy for him to whip out his Keyblade and decapitate Ventus before Terra would have
a chance to retaliate. He was carrying his head under one arm after all, and Ventus’ head was barely
attached to his body in his Halloween Town form. But Terra hadn’t even noticed the spark of
malicious vengeance in those yellow eyes, the brutal grin that Vanitas had worn so many times
before while trying to murder the Guardians of Light again and again and again.

Terra could feel himself beginning to let his guard down around Vanitas, and that was a scary
thought. The last time he had done that, Xehanort possessed him and forced his body to commit
atrocities that were still being rectified to this day.

Thankfully Jack was doing a lot to alleviate the tense atmosphere that hung over the group. The
skeleton hadn’t stopped excitedly raving about this year’s Halloween preparations, gesturing wildly
as the four crossed the Curly Hill towards Oogie’s mansion. He was still dead set on having the
Heartless participate, even after the last two encounters had required Sora to evict the creatures after
they started attacking everyone in sight. Jack Skellington toed the fine line between frightening and
evil, dedicated to all things spooky and gross but with an innocent heart that lived only for the fun
that came with it.

Besides, no one would deny that seeing the Heartless dance would be absolutely hilarious.

“I’m assuming this is the mansion?” Vanitas remarked as the four carefully picked their way across
the rickety rope bridge leading up the front door. He swallowed heavily as a loose wooden board
gave way under his foot as he removed his weight from it, the rotten panel dropping many meters
into the gaping abyss below before shattering into splinters as it finally reached the bottom.

“Oogie always had an obsession with building the most ridiculous mansion he could,” Jack agreed,
his long legs allowing him to cross the gaps in the bridge with ease. “This place was destroyed over a
year ago by Sora, Donald and Goofy, but Oogie’s been rebuilding it.”

“Did nobody wonder if he was planning anything suspicious this whole time?!” Ventus questioned
incredulously, shivering as the chilly autumn wind blew across his icy-cold skin. “Seriously,
everyone here likes scary stuff, but Oogie is the only one who is actively evil.”

“He wasn’t causing us any problems, so we just left him to it. Besides, it keeps him busy and out of
trouble. He might be evil, but he’s one of the scariest folks here and that makes him great at
Halloween!"

Vanitas just shook his head. It was becoming clearer to him that people were willing to overlook an
awful lot if a person could prove themselves useful in some way, which he supposed was part of the
reason why the Guardians of Light were still allowing him to walk around with all his limbs intact.
The mansion itself was janky beyond belief, rooms haphazardly thrown together like the whole
structure would topple over at a moment’s notice and reaching up to the sky. It reminded him a little
of Radiant Garden, although this place was an OSHA nightmare.

“… Is it just me, or is the door open?”

Sure enough, the front door was slightly ajar, two giant gates overlooked by gothic gargoyles with
bared teeth ready to snap at anyone brave enough to approach, and a stained parchment stuck onto
the wood with a piece of tape. The only light source was the glowing yellow moon like a single eye
in the sky above them, and the flickering flame shooting from Terra’s neck hole. Jack reached
forward and plucked the paper off the door so the four could read its message.

COME ON IN! - OOGIE <3
“It’s a trap,” Terra groaned, his suspicions confirmed by the message.

“Yeah, no shit,” Vanitas growled back. “I knew those kids hadn’t name dropped this guy by accident.”

“I mean, do we really have another choice?” Ventus asked, cocking his head to one side and wincing as his exposed vertebrae crunched with the movement. “We need to get those fairy lights back for Santa. Whether he knows we’re coming or not, he couldn’t defend himself against one Keyblade wielder, never mind three.”

The four simply shrugged. They were clearly walking into the sharpened jaws of a bear trap but the mansion was so poorly constructed that trying to find the back entrance would just result in someone getting tetanus from a rusty nail. They would simply need to walk in with their heads held high and take on whatever gruesome torture traps lay beyond the threshold. Vanitas pushed against the door with all his weight, the hinges screeching as the entranceway caved to his strength and allowed them admission. The insides were so dark that he couldn’t see his hand in front of his face, the glow of orange flame doing very little to ward of the claws of darkness around them.

“Hello?” Ventus whispered, shivering from more than just the cold and his single blue eye like a beacon in the dark. Vanitas just rolled his eyes.

“Oi! We know you’re in there, get your ass out here!”

Terra winced as Vanitas’ gravelly voice echoed into the darkness, but his cajoling seemed to work. The heavy gothic door swung shut behind them with a deafening BANG, briefly cutting off all light into the room before the sound of an engine powering up hit the group. He tensed his shoulders, his one free arm ready to summon Earthshaker if Vanitas’ provocation attracted the attention of anything dangerous. Before he could even open his mouth the room flooded with light, momentarily blinding everyone in the area and blasting their ears with loud circus music. After their vision cleared they were faced with a sight they couldn’t have imagined.

“WELCOME TO THE OOGIE BOOGIE QUIZ SHOW OF DEATH AND DISMEMBERMENT!!! (version 0.1.1 subject to change at final release)”

Vanitas rubbed his eye to clear the afterimages that danced across his vision only to be assaulted with a barrage of colours beyond his wildest dreams. Every inch of the room was covered in glowing neon pictures, skulls and spiders and all manner of creepy crawlies like they would pop out of the walls at any moment. A great expanse of grey square tiling reached out in front like a morbid red carpet terminating with an obsidian pedestal lined with vicious spikes. Atop that pedestal was none other than Oogie Boogie himself, clad in is usual stained burlap sack and grinning like a madman in front of a control console.

The whole place was a hallucinogenic fever dream. Oogie had an aesthetic, and he definitely stuck to it.

"OOGIE!" Jack declared, pointing a bony finger at the monster. "You cretinous collection of creepy crawlies! Is this what you've been up to all this time?!!"

"Ah, Jack Skellington, fancy seeing you here," Oogie replied smugly. "Thanks for letting yourself in, I've just been ever so busy since the last two times you killed me. I haven't had a chance to come over and say hello!"

"Is this what you've been working on all this time?!!" Vanitas demanded, gesturing towards the gaudy decorations that seemed to cackle back at him.
"Isn't it grand?" Oogie replied, oblivious to how tacky his sense of taste was. "Not as big as my last mansion, but that one was torn down a year ago and I wasn't expecting more Keyblade wielders to crawl out of the shadows like cockroaches so soon."

"Guys, the fairy lights!"

Ventus pointed at the pedestal Oogie had put himself on; sure enough, those twinkling lights wrapped around the base were the same one pilfered from Santa's workshop. Just how long had he been swiping equipment from Christmas Town to have built all this?!

"Those belong to Sandy Claws!" cried Jack. "Return them at once!"

"Not a chance, bone head," Oogie spat in response. "You may have interrupted my scheming, but I'm not letting you leave without having a little fun!"

The rancid bag of bugs stomped one foot and raised both hands above his head in a victory pose at his exclamation. The pose was accompanied by every light in the building flashing like the guy was a super villain, followed by three streams of coloured string shooting into the air and landing on Oogie. He flinched as the wet streams soaked into his burlap sack and flailed around trying to shake the mess off him before he was stained.

"Wha- Hey! Is this silly string?! Those are supposed to be flamethrowers! Get out of here you stupid brats!"

Cackling burst out from behind the podium as Lock, Shock, and Barrel darted out from their hiding spots with silly string guns in hand. The three sprinted through the legs of the Guardians before grabbing hands could stop their retreat and ploughed through the weighty front doors, slamming shut behind them.

"That's what I get for using those kids in my plans," Oogie grumbled, brushing pink string off his shoulder. "Well, sometimes ya just gotta do it yourself!"

He extravagantly slammed his fist down on the console, depressing a large red button with a toxic skull imprinted on it. Machinery jerked to life and shook the walls, almost throwing the four off their feet as Oogie activated his traps. A trapdoor above the entranceway swung open to reveal a giant clenched fist wearing a patchwork boxing club and attached to a hydraulic system, which punched the ground like a boxer swinging its fist. The Guardians had to jump forward slightly to avoid the impact, effectively cutting off all access to the front door - the only means of escape.

"Just come down here and fight already!" Vanitas snarled, trying to incite the bag of bugs into a fist fight. Oogie only laughed in response.

"Not a chance, boyo, you're not bringing those Keyblades anywhere near me this time! Now, prepare to meet your DOOM!"

Oogie Boogie continued to laugh maniacally as he smashed buttons on his control panel like he was about to punch a hole through the thing. As he continued the square panels in front of Vanitas' feet lit up and shifted rapidly between seven colours - pink, green, red, yellow, orange, purple, and blue. The rainbow of lights combined with the glowing symbols on the walls and reinforced the migraine that had been building up behind his eyes, the four taking a step back in case the floor was booby-trapped. A swift punch from the giant fist soon stopped them in their tracks before they could shimmy out of danger.

"Each colour has a different function. Red tiles are impassable: you cannot walk on them! Yellow
Vanitas stopped listening around the orange tiles. Terra was counting on his one free hand, trying to make sense of the incomprehensible instructions. Ventus just looked at Jack, the two sharing confused shrugs.

"And do you know what the best part of this is?"

Oogie was not actually expecting a response. He finished his flurry of button-mashing with a single over-the-top fist, the colours settling into place on the floor like a mosaic. Vanitas couldn't make heads or tails of what he was looking at, his overly taxed eyes blurring the tiles together into one incomprehensible soup of pigment.

"The puzzle is randomly generated!"

The ground began to shake as the crimson fist restarted its pounding of the earth below it, this time slowly inching forward to force the Keyblade wielders onto the tiles. Vanitas quickly hopped onto a pink tile, barely wide enough for him to stand on alone never mind all four. Oogie was clearly intending to drive a wedge into the group as each man was forced to fight for themselves. He could respect such deviousness. Ventus panicked and jumped onto an orange tile, wafts of citrus hitting his nose which would have been pleasant had the tile in front of him not been blue and rippling with the movement of piranhas beneath the surface. All the while Oogie Boogie continued to cackle at the sight before him. Oh, such sweet victory seeing those insufferable Guardians of Light crumble before him!

Jack took one look at the puzzle and used his extremely long legs to walk from pink tile to pink tile, completely skipping the puzzle with no difficulty.

"... Ah," said Oogie. "Guess it needs more beta-testing."

"Jack, turn this thing off!"

Jack spun around to see the friends he had left behind: Ventus was practically trying to climb up Vanitas’ back while the black-haired boy attempted to shake him off, and Terra had his legs split across two tiles as his suit of armour was too bulky to fit on one, even on his own. The encroaching fist forced Vanitas to toss Ventus off his back and leap forward onto a purple tile, the suds covering the surface soaking the soles of his boots and removing all friction. He yelped as the momentum carried him forward straight into a blue tile, expecting to feel piranhas nibbling at his ankles until he remembered that the fish hated the smell of soap. Why was the puzzle so convoluted?!

“C’mon Jack, I thought skeletons liked puzzles!”

Oogie Boogie rubbed his hands together in glee as he watched the carnage unfold. Ventus had landed on an electric tile, but his undead nature barely allowed the voltage to pass through him, although it did make his already unruly blonde hair stand up. Terra had enough of his balancing act and tried to move forward, but the red tile to his front projected a force field that kept bouncing his foot back before he could make any headway.

So many wasted torture rooms, all his evil schemes, ruined at the hands of those blasted Keyblades!
He could feel the bugs making up his insides writhing in joy as the red fist came closer and closer to annihilating the brats below it. He was so close to victory he could almost taste it.

“You key bearers are all such pains in my ass! Time for you to **DIE**!”

*The look in King Triton’s charcoal grey eyes was one that Vanitas Sora had never found himself on the receiving end of. The brunette had been to so many worlds that they had begun to merge together into an inky pool in his memories, but in every world he had been revered as a hero. Whether he deserved it or not, he carried the weapon that was the key to saving the heart of the world from the claws of the Heartless. King Triton glowered at him with the same expression that he himself only afforded to the Heartless, like the merman was the source of all his problems instead of the cure.*

“Young man, you’re not from another ocean, you’re from another world. Aren’t you?”

Vanitas Sora exchanged a look of shock with Donald and Goofy at the monarch’s words. The three of them only took on these bizarre forms to preserve the World Order, to protect the denizens from the knowledge that other worlds existed across the endless expanse of space. It was the first time that anyone had expressed explicit knowledge that other realms existed, but how did King Triton even come by that information?! Was this why he was so overly protective of Ariel, for fear that she would abandon the tranquil waters of Atlantica to satisfy her wanderlust?

“Then you must be key bearer,” King Triton remarked in a gruff voice, taking the trio’s silence as conformation of his suspicions. “You may fool Ariel, but you can’t fool me. You don’t know your dorsal fin from your tail.”

Vanitas Sora couldn’t deny that – he didn’t even know what a dorsal fin was.

“As the key bearer you must already know, one must not meddle in the affairs of other worlds!”

“Of course I know that! But- “

“You have violated this principle!” King Triton interrupted, his thick brows furrowed as Vanitas Sora attempted to defend himself. “The key bearer shatters peace and brings ruin.”

“Aww, *Sora* Vanitas isn’t like that!” Goofy attempted to defend the raven boy as feelings of guilt pooled in his yellow eyes at the accusations, but it was obvious that King Triton was no longer willing to listen to their words. The merman wrinkled his nose in distain and kicked his tail, turning his back on the trio.

“I thank you for saving my daughter, but there is no room in my ocean for you or your key.”

Sora snapped back into awareness just in time to roll away from the fist, coming close enough to almost shatter his arm under its weight. The water that had now seeped into his clothes came close to zapping him from a nearby yellow tile, but he reacted quick enough to just end up smelling like oranges. His head was still spinning from the flashback and was combining with the mayhem going on all around him until he could barely tell which way was up. He shook himself off before jumping back to his feet. He swore it was getting harder and harder to force himself not to see Vanitas in his place…

Sora needed to stop this trap before someone actually got hurt, but he couldn’t think. His head was still so scrambled and his growing anxiety refused to let up long enough to formulate a plan. His
battle-senses were screaming at him to run, to bolt towards Oogie and dig his Keyblade into the living sack until he stopped moving, but his brain was telling him that moving without a set path would just trigger more traps from the mosaic beneath his feet.

What would Vanitas do in this situation?

Well, Vanitas had already shown him exactly what he would do, back in Santa’s workshop.

Sora growled in frustration and quickly grabbed Terra’s head from under his arm. Ignoring the loud protests from the brunette as his now blind body waved its arms around in confusion, he tried to remember what it was like playing blitzball with Tidus and Wakka. He grasped Terra’s head with both hands, careful not to squeeze too tight, and shot him across the room with a resounding “YEET!”

Terra screamed as he flew through the air before smacking right in Oogie Boogie, landing in his hands. The two stared at each other in shock before the bag of bugs realised he was holding a literal decapitated head. He yelled in fright and dropped the head, staggering backwards in shock. Fortunately Terra landed on the console with a thunk and an “Oof,” powering down the fist and returning the tiles to a miserable grey hue before someone lost their limbs. Unfortunately for Oogie, his backwards step carried him right off the back of his pedestal, toppling down to the floor but not before catching his sack on one of the large metal spikes.

Man, those spikes look so cool but are so impractical.

“Nice work, Terra!” Sora yelled, pumping his fist in the air as Ventus tried to flatten his electrocuted hair. Terra’s head only let out disoriented groan in response. Jack used his height to collect the disembodied head, now with an extremely pissed off expression on his features, while his body wandered around as it tried not to walk into walls without its head to guide it.

“Come on buddy, this way,” Ventus said in a soothing voice, linking his arm with the dullahan’s and guiding him like he was carrying a child.

“Sorry Terra,” Sora apologised profusely, rubbing the back of his head.

“Please ask for my permission next time you want to ‘yeet’ my head across the room,” he replied with a deadpan expression, his head now safely nestled under one arm where it belonged.

Oogie growled and forced himself back to his feet, the wind knocked out of his ‘lungs’ with the impact. He would be damned if he would let those stinking brats steal the taste of victory right out of his grasp. He held the hole in his sack closed to keep the insects from spewing out and stomped up to the Guardians of Light, his usual malicious grin still plastered on his face.

“Hahaha,” he snarled. “You might have ruined my puzzle, but the monster summoned by the green tiles is me! Prepare to face the wrath of Oogie Boogie!”

He raised both hands in the air in early triumph until he felt the bugs that formed his insides once again flowing out of his wound. The motion had stretched the fabric around the cut and widened it to the point that he couldn’t hold it closed. Even now he could feel his shape sagging as the mass of squirming insects couldn’t hold up the heavy sack.

“Dammit, every time! Why didn’t I get the heavy-duty sack?! Whatever, I’ll see you all in hell!”

Sora was a little impressed: even as his body was losing shape Oogie Boogie still clung to his beliefs and cursed those who opposed him until his last breath. His integrity was to be commended, even if
it was a little misplaced. Sora still didn’t know what turned the bag of bugs against the other residents of Halloween Town, but every encounter proved that Oogie himself was no longer willing to accept anything less than complete domination. Sounds like someone else he knew… the brunette tentatively picked up the discarded sack and shook off the remaining bugs that were ensnared in the fibres, the colony of creepy crawlies scattering away into the darkness.

“Should we destroy it?” Sora asked, holding the burlap sack at arms-length. It had been in contact with a bunch of insects after all. “Oogie won’t stop coming back for revenge.”

“Oh, no, just leave it,” Jack insisted. “Oogie might be rotten to the core, but he’s still a resident of Halloween Town. He has every right to be here, just like the rest of us.”

Sora gave the sack a funny look and dropped it where it lay, the sack bunching up into a pile as a couple of stray cockroaches scuttled away and out of sight.

“You know, Oogie is a blast at Halloween!” Jack declared. “Maybe next time you can bring Sora and we can see it together!”

Jack affectionately ruffled Sora’s jet black hair and gave him a warm smile before helping Terra and Ventus reach the higher points of the pedestal, slowly unravelling the stolen fairy lights. Sora froze for a moment at Jack’s words, placing one hand over his chest and feeling his two heartbeats pulse back at him. This was not his body, not his face. It hurt to hear someone he held dear confuse him for someone else, but Sora supposed Vanitas had to deal with that every minute of every day. For a brief moment the exhilaration flowing through his veins had completely eclipsed the feeling of living in a foreign body; it was just like the old days, fighting alongside his friends as part of the team. Being reminded that he was usurping his twin made his skin feel too tight as if he just didn’t belong.

He had been stuck with Vanitas for so long that it was already that difficult for his friends to tell the two apart?

Vanitas watched with unadulterated glee as Dr Finkelstein piled the abhorrent ingredients into the pulsating vessel. He licked his lips, yellow eye glowing with anticipation as the throbbing heart continued to have tchotchkes dropped into its opening by the mad scientist. Vanitas couldn’t tell if his excitement stemmed from the faint glimmer of hope that the experiment could prove useful for repairing Sora’s heart, or just because he wanted to see something blow up. Either way, he wasn’t the only one itching to see the results.

"The ingredients for a heart: pulse!"

Jack gestured grandiosely to a croaking frog, secured to a cork board with a pin in each leg and belly gyrating with every rasping noise it made. The Pumpkin King tore the pins out of the limbs and stuffed it into the vessel before it had a chance to hop away, the croaks muffled by the deep bass of the heart pumping away to sustain a body that no longer existed.

“Weren’t we supposed to be taking the lights back to Santa?” Terra huffed, watching with a look of morbid fascination. “Not dumping them into an experiment?!”

“Don’t be such a downer,” Vanitas replied, eye glued to the heart container. “I want to see how this turns out, and you’re outnumbered four to one.”

"Terror," Dr Finkelstein slurred, fishing out one of his beloved tarantulas and unceremoniously
dropping it onto his work bench. He plucked off each hairy leg one by one and tossed them into the
pot, so engrossed in his experiment that the callous words from the dullahan barely registered in his
mind. The pulsating of the heart reflected in his goggles as if the organ was speaking to him, calling
his name and begging him to grant it life.

“Four?!” Terra protested. “I know you and Jack are in on this insane scheme, but who are the other
two?!”

“Umm, me?” Sora replied with mock offense. “I want to see the Heartless dance, and I don’t hear
Ven protesting!”

“Darkness.” A sorrowful squid was wrenched out of its tank by the cold-hearted scientist who
tugged on its tentacles until the frightened animal let out a few squirts of jet black ink. Sora could
hardly stand still, his heart thumping in time with the vessel as the experiment was approaching its
conclusion.

“Isn’t that technically counting yourself three times?”

“Please don’t say that, my head hurts enough as it is,” Ventus groaned. “Besides, I don’t not want to
see the Heartless dance, so…”

“And finally, light!” Jack produced the fairy lights that the group had salvaged from Oogie Boogie’s
trap, several bulbs now blown but most still twinkling as if each light was a tiny star trapped within
the delicate glass. He carefully bunched the wires up and inserted it inside the heart like he was
cradling a baby. It was the single source of purity in a stew of darkness, the ingredients eddying
together like a vile potion. The skeleton peered at the contents and seemed to approve of whatever he
saw, sealing the vessel with its weighty lock and encasing the contents inside.

“All right, everyone stand back!” he announced. “You do not want to be in the splash zone for this,
trust me!”

Vanitas took the warning to heart, remembering how the clouds of smoke had spewed from the
building during his first visit. He ducked behind a bookshelf, squeezing his body in as tight as he
could and pulling the hood of his jacket up and over his head. He thought about shifting his Shadow
mask to shield his face, but was loathe to cover his eyes in case he missed something cool. Terra slid
the faceplate of his helmet down over his face with a soft clang while Ventus looked around the
room in a panic before diving behind some rusty piping and wincing as a puddle of mysterious fluid
sunk into his clothes. Dr Finkelstein only adjusted his goggles in response: his eyesight was so bad
that he couldn’t spare a single inch of his retinas any more. Jack was already a walking skeleton, so
was beyond the point of worrying about his safety.

“Let her rip!”

The scientist yanked down a giant lever with a resounding clunk, the sounds of machinery buzzing
to life accompanied by his own insane laughter. Thunder rumbled above the house as the lightning
rod extended out like a hand reaching towards the heavens, streaks of lightning threatening to pierce
down and smite the monsters below. The barrel of the laser lit up with an eerie blue glow and
focused on the heart, the beating of the organ quickening as if it sensed its impending doom. Vanitas
could feel his own heart racing along with it.

The room exploded with light as bolts of electricity shot from the sky, down the lightning rod, and
into the heart.

For a moment Vanitas was sure he had gone blind. His skin prickled with the surge of heat, hair
standing on end as the air became fraught with static. He rubbed his right eye to try and clear his vision, eventually giving up and sliding the Heartless mask from his left to his right eye, his left eye protected from the flash of lightning by the opaque mask. Ventus coughed and spluttered on the smoke that engulfed the room as he crawled out from his hiding spot, his sickly green skin tainted with black smudges of soot and his single blue eye glowing against the dark. Terra lifted up his faceplate to reveal a completely clean face, with every other inch of his armour covered in soot and looking rather traumatised. It had been a long day for him.

The heart sat on the table, beating away as slowly as ever and now singed from the heat of the lightning.

“Curse this blasted machine, damned thing has never worked!”

Dr Finkelstein delivered a punch to the metal as hard as his frail arms would allow. He had done this exact experiment before when he created Sally, his useless assistant who never seemed to be where he needed her to be. She had a heart, although it was sewn together from various corpses dug up from their final resting place in the graveyard. This heart was completely inorganic – perhaps therein lay his problem? Could he surmise that the only good heart was one grown in the chest of someone who once lived and walked the earth? Was an artificial heart beyond the realm of even his brilliant science?

“Did it work?” Ventus groaned, picking himself up and poking the heart with a finger. The organ was now decidedly crispy and overcooked, although no less gross. Instead of leaving a slick residue on his finger its flesh now flaked away like pastry after the lightning strike.

“I’m guessing not,” Terra mused, trying to brush away the soot on his suit but only smudging it on the silver metal. “But what was missing? Maybe patience, bravery, determination? A heart can’t just all be darkness.”

“Why not?” Jack asked, his pinstripe suit now a solid black as the residue from the explosion settled into the fabric. “A heart of darkness is perfect for spooks and scares! Tricks and treats! Maybe we just need to try adding something else, perhaps a hint of repulsion or misery?”

Vanitas couldn’t help but feel a wave of disappointment sweep through him, and it wasn’t just coming from the second heart that still ached inside his chest. Sure, the knowledge gained from the experiment would’ve had so much potential for rescuing Sora, but there was part of him that hoped it could help him too. He was still torn about his end goal, unsure whether his desires now lay with his own demise or if he truly wanted to exist free of the shackles of his brothers. The raven Keyblade wielder had spent his entire life craving the release of death, the prospect of merging with Ventus the only thing that pushed him to continue onwards against the pain caused by the destruction of his Unversed. He didn’t know if he wanted that anymore.

“Perhaps this just isn’t meant to be,” lamented Dr Finkelstein, removing his glasses in dismay and revealing the unblemished skin beneath surrounded by grey flesh covering in grime like a raccoon’s mask. “An artificial heart might just be too unstable. Well, time to visit the graveyard again, I can still dig up my mother-in-law. The old hag might finally be of some use to me.”

“An artificial heart… is too unstable….”

Vanitas felt a little queasy, and it wasn’t just from looking at zombie-Ventus. What was he if not an artificial heart, created by Xehanort instead of formed naturally from the union between two loving parents. Hell, whatever messed-up arrangement he and Sora had come to terms with was hardly natural, the brunette effectively leeching off the fraction of heart he possessed as if he was on life support. He was trying to keep the niggling worry in the back of his mind, but Vanitas could already
tell that their hearts were becoming dangerously intertwined. Every memory that Sora recalled seemed determined to slot his own head of black hair in place of his chocolate strands, their hearts becoming less sure of which set of eyes witnessed the events they were reliving.

If an artificial heart was too unstable… what would happen to Sora when he was separated from Vanitas?

And what would happen to Vanitas?
I only have one thing to say.

GET UP ON THE HYDRA'S BACK!!!
taking him for a fool.

He offered a pithy nod and a half-assed wave to a gaggle of women who eagerly waved at him with rosy cheeks and feminine giggles, and delved into his pocket for his Gummiphone. He was waiting on his next two companions to arrive and threaten to kill him, and he could only wander around the Agora so many times before he wore a dent into the marble. The Guardians had been awfully evasive about their identities, but they clearly weren't Guardians of Light themselves otherwise they would already be taunting him in the group chat just like the rest of them. All efforts at wringing more information out of the scumbags had been met with resolute silence and attempts at diverting his questions. Didn't they know that being an uncooperative asshole was his job?!

aoSora: so bored im losin the will 2 live
aoSora: just wanderin round on my own lyk a loser
Riku: THATS NO DIFFERENT FROM NORMAL
aoSora: become the dirt beneath my boots
sweet_memories: they still not shown up yet? i didn't think theyd take this long
aoSora: so r u guys gonna tel me hu im w8n 4 or
soHotImOnFire: oh dont worry you'll find out soon enough
white_witch: seriously please be safe, both of you
still_not_a_master: don't envy you right now
notanobody: man i wish i could watch this ill be hilarious
Riku: I'LL BRING THE POPCORN
aoSora: Y IS EVRY1 TLKN LYK IM GONNA DIE
Luna_Diviner: Please everyone, let's not be so crass. Our priority should be to help Sora, not to antagonise Vanitas.
notanobody: but its so much fun!
aoSora: it dusnt feel much lyk im bein helped
sweet_memories: sorry sora, we dont mean to stress you out but the two people coming really want to speak to you in person
sweet_memories: i promise its nothing bad, please just trust us

Vanitas let out a dangerous growl and shoved the device back into his pocket before his anger got the better of him and the device was left in pieces on the ground. Did their priorities lie with the safety of their friend or the tormenting of their enemy?! A burst of heat radiated out from his chest and across his pecs, hotter than even the blazing sun that hung in the sky above him. Evidently Sora was just as upset about this as he was but there was no comfort to be found there. The feeling of support would have been soothing to the raven Keyblade wielder at any other time, but the knowledge that the Guardians were now pissing both of them off just left him feeling hollow inside.

Well, whatever. Vanitas was not going to let some punk-ass Keyblade wielders bother him. He was a powerful force of nature and any misgivings they had about his loyalties would only result in their demise.

His legs had absentmindedly carried him towards the centre of the Agora, terminating at the foot of the statue that towered above the plaza. The sculpture was of a young man carved from exquisite marble, created with such impeccable attention to detail that every curl in his hair and fold of his toga seemed to billow in the wind. His face glowed with a triumphant smile and each arm was curled to flex his biceps, each muscle as thick as Vanitas' torso. He could appreciate a work of art, but having a statue of yourself plopped in the middle of busiest part of town just so you could flex on everyone seemed a little egocentric. The guy was either a revered hero or just had a lot of money.

A little bit of both.
Vanitas’ attention was drawn to the haphazard construction site barely a stone throw from the imposing marble statue. The citizens of Thebes had obviously decided they just had too much room in the Agora and needed to take up floor space with more useless statues, this one attached to a wide basin that would doubtless become a fountain once it was completed. The figures depicted were too early in their construction to have any discerning features and were more in line with abstract art rather than classical sculptures, although Vanitas could pick out three distinct forms with one significantly taller than the others.

The workers had yet to carve into the marble to reveal the faces that slumbered beneath the surface, but the fountain still vaguely bore resemblance to the people it would soon immortalise. Two were distinctly non-human, one with a broad beak and the other with two droopy ears, but Vanitas’ attention remained affixed to the tallest of the trio. That oddly spiky head and large weapon with a narrow spine and wide teeth seemed oddly familiar…

"Oh, Sora! Long time no see!"

Vanitas flinched at the name tossed into the air from behind him and rolled his eyes in frustration. He turned to offer his usual abrupt acknowledgement only to be greeted by what appeared to be a block of marble with legs. The mineral chunk was so large he couldn't make out whoever was concealed behind it, but the thought of someone possessing the strength to lift such an obelisk left him feeling a little inadequate. The white boulder was laid on the ground with as much grace as one could expect to reveal the man who had been hauling it around like it was as light as a feather. His handsome features were just as chiselled as the statues, his muscled rippling beneath tanned skin and garbed in studded leather armour. Vanitas recognised that dazzling smile from the statue he had been dissing: this was the same man.

"Oh!" the stranger exclaimed as his blue eyes rested upon Vanitas' face for the first time. "I'm sorry, you look similar to a dear friend of mine."

The hero gave him a bashful smile and rubbed the back of his strawberry-blonde hair sheepishly. For someone whose image was depicted with such a triumphant expression of glory, the motion was a lot more humble than Vanitas expected.

"Uhh, that's OK," Vanitas assured him, watching as the boulder of marble was hauled away by several men and a horse, yet had once been carried so effortlessly by the man in front of him. "Sora is my… uhh… twin brother."

The words tasted bitter on Vanitas' tongue but there really was no better way to describe it. If these people couldn't handle the truth about the infinite number of worlds that lay just beyond the horizon then they couldn't handle the circumstances surrounding Vanitas' existence. It stung to reduce his own identity down to a macabre reflection of someone that everybody liked more than him, but it had worked just fine in Halloween Town. No one had questioned him so far, and Sora was such a bizarre character that it was totally believable.

"Well, nice to meet you!" the man replied, accepting his story without a second thought. "I'm Hercules, just call me Herc."

Hercules extended his hand in friendship. Every time someone accepted Vanitas' words at their face value he felt the aching void in his chest grow a little deeper. These people had no idea how dangerous it was to trust his words without question: if they only knew just how many worlds and their inhabitants had met their ends at his hands, they wouldn't even offer him the time of day. Regardless, he had so few cards in his hand at that point, he would take anything he could get. He returned the gesture and intertwined his hand with Hercules', wincing as the hero's immense strength
gripped his fingers until he was sure the hero could have snapped them in half with little effort.

"I'm Vanitas," he stated, shaking his hand in pain as it was released from the hero's grasp. "Is this going to be a statue of who I think it is?"

"You mean this?" Hercules asked, pointing his thumb over his shoulder at the half-finished fountain behind him. The workers were attempting to lift the mammoth chunk of marble into place to act as the head of the shortest figure, but the geode was too heavy to lift. "I'm actually glad that you're not Sora: this is supposed to be a surprise for him! Just don't tell him, 'kay?"

Vanitas tore his eyes away from the smiling hero and took a second glance at the fountain. Now that he knew who the statues were supposed to resemble it seemed so obvious to him – that spiky ball in place of a head could only have belonged to Sora or himself, and the city of Thebes was definitely not creating anything in his honour. Were the other two figures that of his two sidekicks, the duck and dog? Whatever the hell their names were? Vanitas didn't know Sora all that well but he wasn't convinced the brunette would appreciate such a grandiose gesture. He always came across as humble to a fault, refusing to accept words of praise even when he had more than earned them. The uncomfortable churning in his chest only solidified his stance on the matter.

"So, Vanitas, what can I do for you today?" Hercules asked, resting against the lip of the fountain and wiping the sweat from his brow. "Shame Sora never mentioned you before, he's a bit of a celebrity around here!"

"Oh, well… uhh…"

Vanitas didn't have an excuse prepared to defend himself against the probing. He couldn't give a toss about the 'World Order' that Terra had drilled into his head, he was only concerned about how much of his time would be wasted by having a conversation with someone ignorant to the existence of other worlds. He didn't even know how to approach explaining that the brother who isn't actually his brother and in fact wasn't even related to him was now living inside his heart and driving his body around like a mecha.

"I-I wanna train as a hero too!" Sora declared, clenching both fists in earnest and eyes sparkling with determination as he squinted under the Mediterranean sun.

Vanitas gasped and clasped both hands over his mouth in shock, trying to take back the words that had already left his lips. He wanted to lie down and let the darkness consume him whole, and he would drag Sora kicking and screaming to the depths of hell along with him. Sora absolutely did not get a say in any of this, but that clearly wasn't going to stop him from causing him as much strife as he could manage. Hercules let out a bellowing laugh and slapped his knee, oblivious to the look of horror on the raven Keyblade wielder's face.

"Guess it runs in the family!" he exclaimed, playfully punching Vanitas on the shoulder and almost sending him flying. "At least you have a bit more meat on your bones than your brother does. Sora is such a scrawny kid, but he's one of the strongest heroes that Phil has ever trained. You'll fit in just fine."

Vanitas could almost hear Sora's laughing echoing around inside his chest.

Sure, he knew he was dragging himself to all these backwater dumps to retrace Sora's memories so his heart could survive being evicted without collapsing into a black hole, but his brother was making it so difficult to want to help him. There was no doubt in his mind that the brunette would've jumped at the opportunity to train as a certified hero – especially seeing as he still wasn't officially a Keyblade Master despite being more capable than anyone Vanitas had ever met – so he knew it
made sense to at least stick his toe in the water. He was getting awfully sick of enduring the waves of flashbacks, but each one brought him closer to getting his own body back so it more than justified the means.

But Vanitas was a being of pure darkness, dammit! He was about as far from a 'hero' as he could get, in fact he was personally responsible for the destruction of more than one world. What, was he supposed to fake empathy for people he had never met, pretend as if he cared about their inane problems, throw himself into the jaws of a beast for those who would never thank him?! He could envision Sora doing all of those things, and doubtless he had done all of those things, but Vanitas was not prepared to sink that low. He had far too much dignity for that.

"The Coliseum is down there, at the end of the Big Olive," Hercules pointed down a long straight road that seemed to go on forever. "I'd come and see what you're made of but we gotta finish this fountain before Sora shows up! Hey, when you see him next would you make up something to get him to pay a visit? Don't tell him about the fountain, just say it's the Hydra or something. He'll come running."

Vanitas struggled to keep a wicked grin off his face as a brilliant warmth spread out across his chest and up his neck. Sora's cackling only increased in volume until he could barely hear his own thoughts.

"Don't worry, something tells me Sora will know exactly when to come."

Here just gave him a thumbs up and a goofy smile. He turned his attention back to the fountain only to witness the workers and horse collapsed on the ground panting with exhaustion. Clearly the marble boulder had bested them. The hero shook his head in dismay and lifted the rock with one arm and slotted it into its rightful position on the statue, holding it steady as a sculptor chiselled away at it to slowly reveal the image of a particularly angry looking mallard. Each chunk of marble had to be lined up perfectly if they wanted the hidden pipes inside to pump water through the fountain; Hercules just knew that watching a jettison of crystal clear water spurt from the tip of the mage's staff would be a crowd pleaser!

Vanitas' smile slid off his face as Hercules' attention shifted away from him. He was going to have to put a lot of effort into pretending like he cared about this hero shtick, but he had to keep his eye on the prize. His suffering was only temporary, and he had everything to gain.

The 'Big Olive' was aptly named. The extensive street curved around the gentle slopes of the hill that Thebes was founded upon like a serpent hugging its horde of gold. Every inch of the footpath was claimed by vendors and their stalls selling everything from fresh fruit and veg, to togas and stolas, to gyros and rizogalo. Vanitas' eyes were instinctively drawn up to the monumental wall that stretched up above the dense crowd, constructed from thousands upon thousands of painted rocks arranged to form an image of Hercules wearing a gaudy pair of purple sneakers named 'Air Herc's'. As the black-haired Keyblade wielder wove his way through the market he spotted the occasional burst of bright violet peeking out from under the hem of togas on both adults and children alike. Evidently the mosaic was more of a billboard than a piece of art. Those shoes must be awfully comfortable for the aristocratic Grecians to be willing to look so stupid wearing them.

Was this… the ancient Greek equivalent of wearing someone's merch?!

"Psst, hey kid! Over here!"

Vanitas almost jumped out of his skin as the words graced his ears, whispered by something that sounded as if it was less than an inch from his face but was nowhere to be seen. He frantically scanned the marketplace for the source of the creepy voice, only for his eyes to rest on a long, bony
finger attached to an equally angular hand that protruded from the shadows of a nearby alleyway. The finger curled to beckon him into the depths of the side street but was absorbed into the shadows before Vanitas could catch a glimpse of its owner. His golden eyes narrowed in suspicion – it could be the mystery person he was supposed to be meeting, or it might be someone about to mug him. He considered turning away and continuing towards the Coliseum, but the fact that no one around him seemed to notice the stranger's voice or their hand had set him on edge.

Vanitas sighed in relief as the narrow space between the buildings refused to allow even the smallest sliver of light to penetrate the depths of the alley, granting his sweating skin some relief from the oppressive glare of the sun above. He ran one hand through his jet-black hair in a futile attempt to allow cool air to reach his scalp but only managed to dampen his glove with sweat. He was expecting to come face to face with the stranger but only the empty alley greeted him. Perhaps he had just been the subject of a dumb prank? He snorted with annoyance and turned on his heel to make his way back to the main street before someone popped out of the shadows and shanked him.

Vanitas barely took a single step before running headfirst into something blocking his path. For a brief moment he felt the softest cotton smooshed against his cheek before he leapt backwards to face his assailant. It was… a man? It was certainly like no man he had ever come across before. The stranger easily towered above him, casting his own shadow over the raven Keyblade wielder like an obelisk and garbed in a deep ebony toga that dissolved into clouds of smoke at his feet. His cold skin was tinted blue with a death pallor like he was a walking corpse, and the flame atop his head burned with a blue light but cast no warmth. His eyes piercing yellow eyes were sunken into his hollow face, filled with an unearthly hunger.

As Vanitas stared silently up at the man, his black lips parted into a wide smile to reveal needle-like teeth as if he was a ravenous shark.

"Watch the toga kid, it's worth more than your organs would fetch on the black market."

Vanitas felt extremely uneasy in the presence of the stranger. He had faced off against some truly vile beings in his lifetime but this man radiated an intense aura of malice that seemed to turn even the burning glare of the Mediterranean sun as cold as ice. The white noise from the crowds that prowled the Big Olive seemed muffled as if the main street was miles away, and the smell of sulphur and brimstone clung to every surface. The black-haired Keyblade wielder felt his hackles raise under the scrutiny of the stranger as his neck strained upwards to challenge his gaze, matching pairs of yellow eyes locked together in battle. He knew better than anyone that those citrine eyes could only belong to those touched by the corruption of darkness – he was living proof of that.

"I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself," the man exclaimed with a show of feigned shame. "My name is Hades, God of the Underworld and Lord of the Dead! It's a pleasure, Vanitas."

Hades took a deep bow as if receiving a standing ovation, one arm across his chest and the other extended out to his side. Vanitas wasn't sure whether to be more or less concerned now that his suspicions were proven to be founded in truth. He sincerely doubted that the God of the Underworld had approached him with pure intentions, and the prickles of primal fear radiating out from the second heart in his chest only deepened his worries.

"Yeah, cool, whatever," Vanitas huffed with bravado. "I presume you're blocking my path for a reason?"

Hades' smirk only widened at Vanitas' response and he interlocked his slender fingers as if deep in thought.

"Very astute, not like those brainless heroes," the god purred, the false compliment earning a scowl
from the raven boy. "I'm a former acquaintance of Maleficent."

Maleficent. Now that was a name he hadn't heard in a while, although it would never be long enough. Vanitas wasn't exactly a good egg but the witch was one of the few people he could describe as purely and unequivocally evil. Even Xehanort have some delusional ideas about reforming the universe without the taint of darkness, but Maleficent's goal seemed to be no more complicated than leaving a stain of misery and suffering behind her, salting the earth until nothing remained. She thrived off misery, was empowered by hatred, and there were no lines she wouldn't cross to achieve her goal. The universe was better off without her presence looming over the horizon.

"She's old news, no one has seen her in months," Vanitas spat back, arms crossed in defiance.

"And it's about time! But let's not worry about her, I want to talk about you."

"Me?!"

Hades couldn't keep the joy from creeping across his face now that he had Vanitas' interest. The two had never personally crossed paths, but the God of the Underworld was in the business of knowing the stories behind every soul that walked the earth. Every living being had a crimson thread of fate that tied their heart to those who crossed their path, but Sora's thread was so deeply entangled with countless others that it had formed an impenetrable cobweb with the brunette at the centre. Vanitas' aura positively reeked of darkness and rage, and boy did he love beings of darkness. So much potential, so easy to manipulate.

"Yes, you," Hades insisted, slowly hovering towards Vanitas and pushing him backwards and away from his escape to the main street. "We might have met before, but I'm already aware of your little… predicament. It seems you don't have many people on your side these days, eh? But I think we can strike a little deal that will be mutually beneficial."

"What, you gonna ask for my soul? Take my firstborn? What's in it for me?"

Hades gasped in mock horror and placed on hand against his head as if Vanitas' cruel statement had made him feel faint.

"Oh my, why does everyone think I want to take their firstborn? Do I look like someone who is good with children? No, no, I'm proposing something a lot simpler than that, just a small task that I can't do on my own but would let you escape the Guardians of Light."

Vanitas had barely been giving the god a fraction of his attention, but as his words registered in his mind he couldn't help but raise one eyebrow with intrigue. He could tell when someone was trying to pull the wool over his eyes, and Hades was trying to pull the whole sheep. Still, his entire quest had been to save Sora's heart by bolstering his memories, but not a single action he had taken since being regurgitated out of the Realm of Darkness was for his own benefit. Questions about his ultimate fate after the brunette was pried from his chest continued to go unanswered and his mind still replayed the words of Dr Finkelstein - 'an artificial heart is too unstable'. Perhaps it was time to be a little selfish for once.

"… Go on."

"That's what I like to hear!" Hades exclaimed. "You see, I have a bit of a strained relationship with my brother upstairs – we don't exactly see eye to eye and he's banned me from Olympus. Such a shame, Olympus always has the best hummus in town. Thing is, I really want to… 'take my pet for a walk', shall we say. It gets awfully stuffy down in the Underworld all the time, and he just wants to get some fresh air."
Vanitas didn't believe Hades for one moment, but didn't interrupt his monologue. He leaned his weight back onto one leg and tapped his foot impatiently.

"So, here's what I'm proposing," Hades continued. "Thebes is protected by a force field which is powered by the Olympus Stone. I'll be fried by lightning if I so much as show my face up there, but you look like Sora. Hercules already trusted you enough to send you to Phil, right?"

Vanitas paused to consider Hades' proposal. He had always hated shared the face of his enemy, but this entire experience had only driven that hate deeper into his soul. He hadn't considered using his features to his advantage, not that anyone with a working pair of eyes would get the two confused after more than a single glance. Hades vanished in a puff of black smoke only to reappear behind Vanitas, resting his hands on his shoulders in a way that was supposed to be endearing but only sent frightened shivers down his spine.

"If you could convince someone to take you up to Olympus and then steal the Olympus Stone from under Zeus' nose, the force field would come down and I could take care of Thebes. Imagine the distraction that would cause: no Guardian of Light is going to think twice about you while I'm around. I can get my revenge, and you..."

"... I could escape."

Hades' pointed fingers were digging into the shoulders of Vanitas' bodysuit so hard that he was about to draw blood. Something about the proposal just wasn't sitting right in his head or his heart. Why would the literal God of the Underworld need to approach him and ask for help? He was a god for crying out loud. Even as the red flags continued to mount, his heart was consumed with the thought of sweet freedom, of finally dropping the shackles that were the Guardians of Light and running free. No more taking their abuse or belittlement, no more pretending like he cared about concepts such as 'friendship' or 'the right thing to do'. He could go somewhere where no one knew his name and start again, live the life he was denied from the moment Xehanort had dragged him kicking and screaming into the world.

Sora grimaced and shook his head. He had run into Hades more than once, and the god was a master at obfuscating his intentions behind flowery words. He had no doubt that as soon as that force field came down he would let his hell beasts loose on Thebes and kick back to watch the destruction until nothing remained. Vanitas wasn't the only one concerned for his safety – Sora had also noticed how the plan to revive his shattered heart neglected to consider Vanitas' stance on the matter. He didn't blame his twin for feeling slighted by his friends, but there was no situation in which the lives of innocents would be worth his freedom.

"I-"

Vanitas clamped his hands over his mouth before Sora could get another word out. No. He was done being told how to act and what to say. His entire existence revolved around either Sora or Ventus, and it was about damn time he took his fate into his own hands.

*Please don't do this.*

"You're on!" he bellowed, forcefully extending one hand out and offering a handshake to Hades.

*NO!*

Hades' grin threatened to split his face in two as he accepted Vanitas' outstretched hand and firmly shook it. Vanitas shivered as a spike of ice shot up his arm at the contact as if deep frostbite had set into his bones, but when he retracted his hand there were no marks on his glove. He couldn't help but
wonder if he had just done something he was going to regret.

"Pleasure doin' business with you!" Hades exclaimed, clapping his hands together in delight. "Well, I must be off, I think I left the oven on. Don't worry, I'll know when you've taken care of things... Toodles!"

The god clicked his slender fingers and vanished in a mushroom cloud of smoke. Vanitas coughed and fanned his hand in front of his face to clear away the smog, only to discover that he was once again alone in the alley. He looked back down at his hand as the prickles of ice continued to tingle across his fingertips, wondering if his decision was going to come back to bite him. His head continued to insist that placing his own freedom above everything else was the right thing to do, but his heart still wavering in its faith. Vanitas just chalked that up to Sora voicing his discontentment. He still remembered the ultimatum he had presented the brunette with on the beach – it was his body, so he would play by his rules. Vanitas hadn't done much to enforce that offer, but it was never too late to start.

As Vanitas turned back onto the Big Olive and continued down towards the Coliseum, he couldn't help but feel a set of eyes burning a hole through the back of his head. Strange...

Phil was starting to wonder if he had peaked.

Thebes had no shortage of wannabe heroes ready to kick down the doors of the Coliseum and demand tutelage under his wing. Ever since Hercules had gone the distance and rose to the top was a line of young men and women begging to learn from the trainer of heroes. Thebes was so frequently embroiled in the posturing between Hades and the Gods residing in the illustrious paradise of Olympus that conflict had become a part of their daily lives. Barely a week went past without Cerberus trying to use the city gardens as his litter box, or the gargoyles trying to rob the emperor's treasury. The city guards were always looking for new recruits, and the citizens of Thebes were happy to dedicate their lives to the safety of those that lived within its walls.

Phil wasn't saying that the kids that strolled into the halls of his Coliseum with adventure in their eyes weren't cut out to be heroes, but... well, that's exactly what he was saying.

The satyr knew better than anyone that a hero wasn't measured by the strength of their fists or the width of their biceps. It required a certain spark of righteousness and selflessness, the willingness to put one's safety to the side for the good of others and to find light in the deepest darkness. Most of the prospective heroes were just looking to slay some beasts for clout and Phil would have no part in it. His reputation was on the line, and it was better to train no one at all rather than to train someone who was only in it for bragging rights.

Maybe it was just time he found a nice wood nymph and settled down. Satyr's were supposed to spend their time drinking wine and throwing parties, not running boot camps for kids who needed a hoof up their ass! Phil didn't trust anyone to run the Coliseum in his stead, even though it seemed to get flattened by Hades every other week. No, he wouldn't retire until his own image was immortalised in the stars right alongside Hercules, his pride and joy.

He finished polishing the trophy he had in his hand and slid it back into place alongside its brethren. The Hades Cup had so many pointy edges that it was a pain in the ass to keep clean, but the deep blue obsidian trophy glowed with an ethereal light when freshly cleaned that caught the eye of any ambitious youths to wander in through his doors. Phil's star pupil was no doubt Hercules, but he considered Sora to be a worthy runner up. The kid was significantly more proficient in combat than
even the demigod, handing Hades' ass to him on a silver platter where Herc himself had failed, but he just wasn't mature enough to take up his mantle as a true hero yet. The brunette needed a couple more minutes in the oven, so to speak, but Phil wouldn't be surprised if Sora's visage joined Hercules in the night sky with his own constellation someday. Man, that would be one weird looking constellation...

Phil's ears twitched as the sound of the Coliseum doors scraping against the stone floor echoed through the entrance chamber. Someone had just entered the building and it obviously wasn't Hercules, otherwise the hero would've already swept him up in a hug and told him about his day. Phil didn't turn around to greet the guest – it was probably just some washed-up punk looking for training from the legendary Philoctetes so they could brag to their friends. So few of these wannabe protagonists were worth his time, barely worth learning their names.

"Are you Phil? I'm here for the… hero training."

Phil bent over on his pedestal and picked up a sign that was resting against the wall, displaying an advertisement for the next Pegasus Cup. The competition always drew competitors from all across the Mediterranean, at least it did now that there was no risk of Heartless maiming the population. The fear of having a heart stolen tended to put people off.

"Yeah yeah, that's me, start by moving that block over there."

Phil waved one hand behind him without looking, gesturing towards a large block of carved marble on the floor. He smiled to himself as he hung the sign on the wall next to the polished trophies, promising to any willing combatant that they too could have their name etched into the plaque below each trophy. The satyr had used the marble block as a training tool long before he met Hercules, and it was extremely useful in separating the weeds from the crops. The block was far too heavy for the average human to lift, but that wasn't the point. Rather than try in vain to lift something that weighed more than they did, the intention was to see who was willing to admit that they weren't strong enough.

Knowing how to recognise when they had reached their limits, and the humility to openly admit it. No person was worthy to call themselves 'hero' if they couldn't put their pride to the side.

Vanitas scowled at the dismissive gesture. The satyr didn't afford him his full attention, didn't ask his name or even turn to make eye contact. It was like the goat had already decided he wasn't worth his time. Vanitas wasn't especially motivated by the prospect of being named a bonafide hero, but having his presence disregarded by someone barely half his height was rubbing him the wrong way. He snorted and stomped over to the block of marble, eyeing it up like it had personally offended him. He cracked his knuckles and pushed his palms against the rock, putting all his weight behind the movement.

The marble completely refused to budge. Thankfully Vanitas was wearing gloves, otherwise the rough surface of the rock would've taken a layer of skin off with how hard he was pushing against it. Was this supposed to be a joke? Was the satyr messing with him?!! Vanitas growled and placed his entire weight against the block, wincing as the marble chafed against the exposed skin on his cheeks. He didn't need anyone's approval, but he'd be damned to sit back and let someone else decide that he wasn't worth their time. He grunted and shoved the marble with his entire weight, eyes screwed shut with the effort.

Phil stopped in his tracks as the sound of marble scraping against the floor hit his ears, the block finally moving by a single inch.

The satyr stopped adjusting the angle of the Pegasus Cup sign and turned to get a good look at the
boy who had barrelled in through his doors. Only his back was visible as he was still pressed up against the marble block, but for a brief moment Phil swore that Sora had waltzed back into his Coliseum for the first time. It took only a single blink for that memory to pass from his mind, the jet-black head of uncontrollable hair and tense, raised shoulders could never have belonged to the laid back brunette. As the kid relinquished his attack on the block and stood up to confront the satyr, Phil couldn't help but wonder if someone with his appearance would be better suited as a villain than a hero.

"Oi, what gives?!" Vanitas demanded. "There's no way I can lift something like that! Are you playing games with me?"

"Hey cool it, kid," Phil responded gruffly. "I got two words for ya: Know. Your. Limits."

Vanitas confusedly counted the number of words on one hand. Phil jumped down from the podium, his hooves clacking against the stone floor, and circled around the black-haired boy to get a good look at him. The kid was clad head to toe in a deep black muscle suit accented with crimson red striped converging at his chest over where his heart would be. Between the bodysuit and the metal jaw piece that reflected the gold sunlight streaming through the windows from outside, the boy looked like he had just clawed his way out of the Underworld. Still, Phil wasn't averse to those who toed the line between heroism and darkness – he had trained both Zack and Cloud, and they were known to use the power of darkness for the sake of good. It was a fine line, but completely achievable.

"You look like you're made of some tough stuff," he mused, tugging on his goatee in thought. "A lot less scrawny that most of the whelps who drag themselves in here. What makes you think you've got what it takes?"

"Hercules recommended I speak to you," Vanitas explained, his ire lessened after being complimented on his physique. "I'm Sora's… twin brother, and I'm trying to retrace his steps for… something."

Phil hummed to himself as he contemplated the kid's words. If Hercules had pointed the kid in his direction then he must've seen something in him that set him apart from the countless others that had vied for the satyr's attention. There was no reason to doubt his statement – if it wasn't for the difference in hair colour and his sour expression the boy would've been identical to his brother – but Sora had never mentioned any family members at all, never mind any siblings. Regardless, if the brunette's proficiency in combat and knack for heroism ran in the family, then this kid would have no trouble fitting in.

"Well, if you're anything like your brother then we should get started! Let's head out to the courtyard – we'll begin with the training urns. Even the biggest hero has to start at the bottom!"

Vanitas was about to open his mouth and protest that he was a powerful being of darkness and had no intention of smacking around a bunch of urns to try and get a high score, but the two were interrupted by the doors of the Coliseum practically being thrown off their hinges.

"PHIL, HAVE YOU SEEN-"

Oh no.

Not those two.

Standing in the doorway were two figures Vanitas had hoped never to lay eyes on again. One tall and one short, at first the light streaming in from the open door blinded him but as his vision adjusted
their features became more apparent. A dog and a duck garbed in regal robes like they had stepped right out of a story book, carrying a decorated shield and staff that denoted their prowess as warriors. Vanitas had first-hand experience of their skills, but didn't dare raise his hackles for fear that Sora would prevent him from fighting his friends. The brunette had already done that once before when he was facing Riku, and Vanitas didn't want to give him any more opportunities to seize control of his body.

Sora could feel his heart about to burst out of his chest at the sight of the other two half-pints. They were so close yet felt so far from him, like if he reached out to touch them they would just vanish into smoke. A lump rose in his throat, the corner of his eyes dampening at the shocked look on their faces, the two rushing in through the doors of the Coliseum to greet him.

"Donald! Goofy!" Sora exclaimed with a smile, about to jump forward into a hug before Vanitas stopped him and regained his posture. "Ahem... hello? I guess?"

"Vanitas!" Donald quacked with rage, charging forward with his staff ready to blast him into oblivion. "Do you lay a finger on Phil!"

"Nice to see you too," Vanitas spat back. "I'm not doing anything wrong, just talking to Phil about the hero training."

"Pah, you? A Hero?!" Donald practically fell back onto his fathered backside with laughter at the notion. Vanitas could feel his cheeks prickling with rage at the reaction, his fists involuntarily clenching. Sora was squirming inside his heart, desperately prodding and poking for any cracks in his resolve that he could squeeze through and take control. Part of him wanted to give the brunette a chance to greet his long lost friends so they could get on with it, but the other part was concerned he would spill the beans on his deal with Hades. He just couldn't allow his brother to get in the way, not now. Not when he was so close.

"Yes, me," he growled, pointing at his chest with one thumb. "I've been tasked with retracing Sora's steps, and if this is what it takes then so be it."

"Uhh, no offence but it's kinda hard to imagine you as a hero," Goofy chuckled, not quite as rambunctious as the duck but still teasing him. "You know, after everything you did to Sora."

"Excuse me, what did you do to Sora?" Phil demanded, turning to Vanitas with his hands on his hips and a stern expression on his face. Vanitas jumped a little and raised both hands in submission.

"N-nothing!" he insisted. "Not this time anyway... wait, are you two the ones that I was told to wait for?"

"That's us!" Donald proclaimed, puffing his chest feathers out against his blue jacket. "The King wants us to keep you in check, and we're the only ones fit for the job!"

"Hold on a sec, what about my training?" Phil demanded, upset that he'd been pushed to the side lines. "You can't just waltz in here and ask for my help then waltz back out!"

"I mean, I have no problem doing that," Vanitas stated, earning himself a glare from everyone in the room. He just shrugged in response.

"Gawrsh, well we were planning on heading up to Olympus!" Goofy explained. "That place means a lot of Sora after all."

Phil seemed to think for a moment before snapping his fingers decisively. He was a little peeved at
Vanitas' lack of gratitude, but he could still smell a learning opportunity when it came to him.

"Well, that settles it!" the satyr exclaimed, pointing at Donald and Goofy. "You two want to graduate and become full heroes, and you," he continued, now pointing at Vanitas, "want to start your hero training. Why not combine the two?"

"Well… I guess we were planning on taking Vanitas with us…." Donald grumbled, still unhappy with the whole situation but relenting none the less. "But how does this prove that he's not evil anymore?!

"Evil is such a harsh word," Vanitas remarked nonchalantly. "I prefer the term 'anarchist'."

"I don't care what you prefer!"

"Now now, play nicely boys," Phil intervened, worried that a spat was about to break out next to his delicate trophies. "Passing on your knowledge to others is a vital part of being a true hero. I've done it for Hercules; Hercules has done it for you. If you want to prove yourself as true heroes then I need to see you do the same! And we have a willing participant right here!"

Donald glared at Vanitas like he was considering using Thundaga to send him back to the Realm of Darkness. His magic was churning around inside of him ready to unleash itself at the nearest target; it took all his restraint just to hold it back. He was standing right in front of the single obstacle between Sora and safety, and asking him not to intervene and save his friend was blasphemy to his ears.

Donald knew that it wasn't as easy as just ganging up on Vanitas and beating him until he handed Sora's heart over, but the desire to mutilate the raven Keyblade wielder was difficult to resist.

"Fine," he growled. "At least we can keep a close eye on you."

"That's the spirit!" Goofy exclaimed, smiling and putting his hands on Donald's shoulders even as the mage's turbulent expression refused to budge. "We gotta make the best of it. Maybe this can be just like old times!"

Vanitas doubted it, and he could tell that Sora agreed. The excited storm that had been raging in his chest was replaced with one of apprehension, and only a fraction of it was coming from Sora. How does he make small talk with the two people who considered him their worst enemy? How would he manage to tolerate their presence as the three climbed up a mountain together? What was stopping them from just throwing him off the peak of the mountain and picking up his shattered heart from the bottom?

It was going to be a long climb.

Goofy knew he should have been relieved to hear the news that Sora had been found, perhaps even excited, but all he felt was fear.

If anyone had asked him a year ago, his heart would've been consumed with the longing for the tranquil walls of Disney Castle. A world where time seemed to stand still and every day was summer. Goofy had a bright spark of adventure in his heart, but his soul would always yearn for the simple comforts of a quiet life. Now the days just blurred together into one, every waking moment spent patrolling the same routes and wandering through the same gardens. The world he loved had become a cage with no key for the lock. Now he would give anything to spend just one more day sailing through open space with his friends at his side looking for the next big adventure.

It was a sentiment that he knew was shared with Donald. The only member of their trio who could...
possibly rival Sora's insatiable lust for adventure was Donald himself, although the two didn't always get along. They were both equally stubborn and vocal so they sometimes rubbed each other the wrong way, but the two could never stay mad at each other for long. Their unbreakable bond had only been strengthened by their innumerable escapades across the cosmos, and Goofy knew that the mage missed their lost friend just as much as he did. Their decision to retreat back to Disney Castle with the King was a mutual one, but they both equally shouldered the feelings of guilt that came along with it.

No one would trust Donald around their kids for more than five minutes without something being blown up, but Goofy had a sort of fatherly pride towards Sora. Ever since Max had left for college there was a void in his life that Sora seemed to slot into perfectly, not that the knight would ever replace his dear son. He had been certain that watching the brunette go off on his own to save Kairi's heart from whatever dark abyss it had ended up in would be no more painful that the day Max flew the coop to strike out into the world on his own. He was wrong. That pain never got any better.

The knight shrugged his heavy shield off his back and rested it against the rocks of Mount Olympus with a metallic clang, allowing himself a moment to rest under the scorching sun. He was really regretting wearing his green turtle neck now. Donald was zoned out close by, lying face down on the top of a boulder and groaning as his downy white feathers refused to allow heat to escape. He swore it wasn't this hot the last time they were here, but then again the previous mountaineering expedition had involved a lot more running up walls. Perhaps the turbulent air rushing past had defended them against the Mediterranean sun, or perhaps the last three months had left them a little rusty. Nevertheless, dragging themselves up the mountain was much less pleasant than the last time.

The heat wasn't the only thing making the experience unpleasant.

Vanitas groaned with frustration and threw himself onto the ground, huddling under the shade of Donald's rock in a desperate attempt to fend off the blazing heat. He wiped his brow with one hand as the metal shielding his jaw absorbed the sunlight and glowed with its own heat until it threatened to roast his skin. Of all the abilities that would have been useful to leech from Sora, his knack for Flowmotion would have been the most helpful. Vanitas never got the hang of it: his mind was more suited to carving a straight path between himself and his destination and couldn't make the distinction between what he could bounce off and what was just an obstacle in his way. He was just grateful that neither the duck or dog has tried to get him to collect any ingredients on their way up here.

Besides, he had tried to run up a wall and fell flat on his back. After Donald and Goofy laughed at him he felt no desire to try again.

"Are we there yet," he groaned, peeling his bodysuit away from his neck and trying to fan cool air down his torso.

"The answer is still no," Donald spat, refusing to lift his head as he caught his breath. "The mountain is a lot bigger when you have to climb it properly."

"Shame we didn't bring a picnic," Goofy remarked, trying to keep the atmosphere light. "It's a beautiful day for some food in the sun!"

"Too hot," both Vanitas and Donald slurred. Goofy chuckled – the two had a lot more in common that they realised.

"Well, while we're resting, why don't we try and spark some of Sora's memories?" he queried, sitting down heavily in the grass and fanning himself with his har. "We had to fight that Titan up here, so there's gotta be something we can use."
"Hmm…”

Vanitas pondered the knight's words for a moment, rubbing his chin in thought before hissing and pulling his hand back as the hot metal burnt his fingers. He hadn't forgotten that their entire reason for climbing this godforsaken mountain was for Sora's benefit, but the black-haired Keyblade wielder was doing everything in his power to block his brother out. He was so concerned that Sora would push him to one side and blurt everything out to the duck and dog that it was better to build a concrete wall and try to muffle his cries behind it. Without Sora's cooperation he didn't know if it would even be possible to tap into his memories.

Vanitas grunted and pulled out his Gummiphone, looking to the group chat for inspiration. The device was warm to his touch and he feared that it had overheated in his pocket, but it still sparked to life as his reflection graced the screen. Thank God Sora wasn't smart enough to put a proper pin on his phone.

still_not_a_master: does anyone know how to beat stage 10 of mickey cuts up
still_not_a_master: cat keeps getting in the way im dying here
Master_Aqua: I knew buying you that Classic Kingdom console was a bad idea. You haven't been able to put it down.
notanobody: just check the wiki
still_not_a_master: it hasn't been updated since february
aoSora: try pressin the buttns harder u filthy casual
still_not_a_master: im serious i need that platinum achievement
aoSora: sry terra, vanitas is bein a butt
aoSora: do the outsides 1st then wen u get 2 the bottom do this
aoSora: ^_^ v ^ ^ v
aoSora: hope that makes sense
still_not_a_master: brb gotta try this
Master_Aqua: Please don't enable him. Staring at that screen all day isn't good for his eyes.
sweet_memories: have the two showed up yet?
aoSora: fckn dolan n goomby? yes theyre here
Riku: IM SURPRISED THEY LET YOU LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO TYPE THIS
aoSora: so am i
10_year_nap: hey if ur in thebes pls pick me up sum baklava while ur there? (*^_^*)
10_year_nap: ... pretty pls?
10_year_nap: vanitas dnt u dare leav me on read ( *°Δ° *)

Vanitas sniggered to himself and locked his phone. He hooked his arms behind his head and leaned back against the smooth rock, his eyes gazing over the view of Thebes from above as if he was a circling eagle. He could appreciate its beauty more now that he was away from the relentless merchants and crowds of the Grecian people. If it hadn't been for the scalding sun blazing down from overhead, he would swear he was back on the tranquil Destiny Island's, the sand under his back and waves tickling his feet. Such a moment of peace was rare in his hectic lifestyle, but a part of his heart was still tied to his home.

"So, Kairi's home is out there somewhere. Right?"
splayed out across the bark as if reaching out to touch his own baggy red shorts. Vanitas preferred seeing her blue eyes light up with joy and mirth. The silence didn't suit her.

"Could be. We'll never know by staying here."

Vanitas knew that Riku's wanderlust far outshone his own, but the dark look in those cyan eyes was so foreign that it was like meeting the gaze of a stranger. The silver-haired boy leaned causally against the trunk of the Paopu Tree with both arms crossed and brows furrowed. Riku was even more stubborn than Vanitas himself, so if his gaze was already set on the horizon then there was nothing in the world that would take his eyes away. Vanitas wished that he could have just a small slice of his best friend's resolution – his own heart still wavered with concern that they were stepping out into a world that was so much bigger than them.

"But how far could a raft take us?" he asked, his obsidian hair fluttering in the gentle sea breeze without losing his trademarks spikes.

"Who knows," Riku huffed, his face still turned towards the ocean. "If we have to, we'll think of something else."

"So, suppose you get to another world," Kairi interjected, her own sense of adventure swelling in her heart. "What would you do there?"

Riku closed his eyes and allowed his head to rest on the trunk in thought. Vanitas was so focused on the end goal of their journey that his mind hadn't lingered on the steps they would take to get there. That was something he and Riku had in common. They both needed Kairi's level-headed input otherwise their emotions would carry them right off the edge of a cliff without a thought of what lay below.

"Well, I haven't really thought about it," Riku admitted, his voice now softer as his mind returned to idealistic wondering. "It's just… I've always wondered why we're here on this island. If there are any other worlds out there, why did we end up on this one? And suppose there are other worlds… Then ours is just a little piece of something much greater."

"I dunno..." Vanitas groaned, hooking his right leg over the trunk of the Paopu Tree and leaning back against the bark, hands behind his head and eyes to the heavens. He didn't want to spend his waking hours on such existential ruminating. He just wanted to go on an adventure, fight some monsters, recover buried treasure! Not ponder on the meaning of life!

"Exactly!" Riku exclaimed, finally turning to face his friends who were taking in his monologue with curious expressions. "That's why we need to go out there and find out. Just sitting here won't change a thing. It's the same old stuff. So, let's go!"

Vanitas couldn't stop his heart from matching his best friend's excitement. Riku's words conjured an image in his mind of the three of them standing together with glory, having conquered any and all trials that dared stand in their way. He knew that as long as he had his friends by his side then it would all be worth it. Kairi, Riku, and Vanitas Sora, together forever.

Vanitas gasped and bolted straight up as if he had been awoken from a nightmare. What on earth was he doing?! He knew damn well that he had never stepped foot on Destiny Islands before the Door to Light had spat him out there, never mind lived any of his life on those pearly white beaches.
They was Sora's memories and not his. Even though he knew the puzzle pieces weren't lining up to form the picture they were meant to, he could still hear the roaring ocean in his ears and the taste of salt on his tongue. It made him feel homesick for a place he had never called home. The aching in his chest refused to go away no matter how hard he tried to silence it.

"Come one, let's keep going," he commanded, jumping to his feet. Donald had been on the cusp of sleep and was jolted into awareness, quacking loudly and falling sideways off his rock. Goofy took his eyes away from the sky in surprise, not expecting the black-haired boy to be so enthusiastic about their quest. "We gotta get this over with sooner rather than later, and sitting around all day isn't going to free me of you two."

"Well, Vanitas, I have to say you've surprised me!" Goofy stated, a smile on his face as he dusted down his pants. "I was sure you would've tried something by now!"

"I want out of this more than anyone else," Vanitas replied gruffly.

"Yeah? Well I don't trust you!" Donald declared, puffing out his chest in pride as if he was the only sane one in the group.

"Good," Vanitas growled back. "You shouldn't. Let's get moving."

Donald and Goofy exchanged a knowing look as Vanitas stomped past them up the final stretch of the mountainside. The sun became even more ferocious as they ascended but the strong winds that circled the peak took the edge off. If Vanitas strained his neck he could actually see the sharp point of Mount Olympus looming over them like an arrow pointing up to the heavens. They didn't actually expect him to climb all the way to the top?! Donald must've spotted the grimace on his face and chuckled from behind him, the sounds of his webbed feet slapping against the rocks below muffled by the roaring winds.

"Not up there! The entrance is through here."

The duck pointed towards a narrow path in the mountainside marked with a single flickering torch. As the trio ducked into the ravine, Vanitas' eyes fell on a jagged crack in the rock face that seemed to glow with soft white light from the other side. The light made his hair stand on end as if the air was saturated with magic, not unlike the radiance of the Door to Light itself. Perhaps the trait was just an indication of the threshold between worlds, but it was a clear sign that something unearthly lay beyond. Goofy unhooked his shield from its holster on his back and tossed it at the crack like a frisbee, the stalwart metal slicing through the rock like warm butter. The ground beneath them shuddered and Vanitas feared for a moment that the assault would trigger a landslide, but the rocks blocking their path merely crumbled away to revealed what lay behind.

"... Whoa..."

It was like Vanitas had just stepped through a portal to another world. The city in front of him glowed with radiant golden light a million times brighter than the sun but with a gentle warmth like a soft hug, encapsulating his entire being as if lulling him into gentle sleep. The clouds squished softly beneath his feet leaving a damp residue behind as each step threatened to spill rain out of the fluffy white clouds and down to the world below. Every surface seemed to glimmer with fantastic jewels and masterful carvings that the Grecian could only dream of replicating. If there ever was heaven on earth, then this was it. Perhaps even literally.

Past the acres of grandiose adornments, Vanitas could sense a lingering feeling of sadness and pain that he couldn't shake. The exquisite carvings and sculptures felt like a facade, a mask hiding the true world that lay just beneath the surface. The echoes of death that wrapped around his heart like a vice
sullied his view of the world, turning what many would behold as a vision of perfection into nothing more than a lie. But what would cause it? What was it about this place that set his nerves on edge, and why did he feel such a strong connection to the misery that lay past those pearly gates?

"Don't stand there with your mouth open!" Donald exclaimed, trotting past him as if the splendid view was simply a daily occurrence. "You'll catch flies."

Vanitas hadn't realised he had been standing still with a look of awe on his face and promptly closed his jaw as requested. Donald and Goofy led the way up the staircase to the main plaza, each brick made of solid gold and probably worth more than his Keyblade.

"I know how you feel, this place is a little flashy for me," Goofy laughed. "This is the Realm of the Gods - Hercules' home town."

"Wait, so this isn't heaven?" Vanitas balked. "I thought this is where you end up after you die."

"I guess it depends on who you ask," Goofy continued. "The folks here think you end up in the Underworld, but we know that all hearts go back to Kingdom Hearts."

Vanitas gave the knight a conflicted look before turning his attention back to Olympus, the clouds compressing below his feet like he was walking on jello. He recognised the funeral pyre that rose out of the ground like a monument to those who had passed on - it was the same pyre that Riku's soul had attached itself to when he and Jiminy Cricket had traversed the line between life and death to save his friends. That was right before the Lich appeared and stole his heart away, dooming his best friend to an eternity of restlessness as his heart was kept from the final resting place among the heart of all hearts. He could still envision Riku's lifeless body floating atop the pyre, barely corporeal and shimmering with blue light as he clung to the last strand of life in his heart.

More interesting was not what previous rested atop the pyre, but what currently rested atop the pyre. The Olympus Stone.

The medallion was suspended in mid-air as if the pyre was cradling it in its hands, slowly revolving and emitting sparks of bright light in every colour of the rainbow. Vanitas licked his lips. He wasn't having any second thoughts about his deal with Hades, but standing so close to the object of his quest was tantalising, as if he had imagined the entire exchange but was now suddenly more real than he could imagine.

"Hey look, you can see the Coliseum from here!"

Vanitas snapped out of his reverie to see Donald and Goofy peering over the precarious edge of the cloud layer at the city of Thebes below. The town appeared as if constructed as a child's toy from such a dizzying height, and just looking over the edge made him feel queasy. A slight shimmering hue hugged the town, which must have been coming from the force field that Hades mentioned. It gave the town an ethereal glow as if it hovered on the edge of divinity. Vanitas supposed that it did, considering it rested at the foot of Mount Olympus.

"Wow, Herc's statue is so big we can still see it!" Goofy pointed out, the muscled monument standing tall and flexing on everyone in the Agora. "Gawrsh, glad they were able to rebuild that..."

"After Sora knocked it down, heehee..."

Vanitas silently took a few steps back, thankful that the fluffy clouds absorbed the sounds of his footsteps. This was his chance, he had to take the Olympus Stone now while they were distracted. If the duo were planning on taking him on a tour of the Realm of Gods then he would completely lose
the opportunity to pilfer the medallion, and he was not climbing the mountain again. Vanitas quietly turned his attention back to the pyre, grasping onto the intricate golden curves that wound up its height like ropes. He shimmied his way to the top and wrapped his fingers around the Olympus Stone, shoving it in his pocket before he could change his mind. The medallion sent sparks of vitality shooting down his arm as it lay in his palms, as if it was strengthening his muscles through magic alone, but the feeling passed as it curled up next to the Gummiphone.

Vanitas had expected an alarm to trigger at his thievery but the only sound in the air was his own strained breathing. He released his grip on the gold structure and dropped back to the ground, the clouds compressing beneath his feet and cushioning his fall. He grunted with the motion and quickly stood upright, cautious that the duck and dog might turn around and find him in a suspicious position. He needed to keep his head down if he wanted any chance of slinking away into the shadows later, otherwise the metaphorical chain around his neck would only tighten.

"Hey, so about that whole 'reviving Sora's memories' thing wait what on earth is THAT?!"

Vanitas pointed down to the view of Thebes below with one finger, an expression of fright on his face. Donald and Goofy followed the line of his gesture before joining in with exclamations of their own. The trio were too high in the heavens to make out any details, but a large black shadow had appeared in the middle of the city and small rivulets of smoke curled up into the air, betraying the damage that the town was enduring. The faint shimmering that had once hung over the town like fine silk was nowhere to be seen. Hades had told him he would know when the Olympus Stone was no longer in its resting place, but Vanitas hadn't expected him to make a move that quickly.

"Gawrsh, we better get down there!" Goofy exclaimed. "We gotta help the city!"

Both Donald and Vanitas nodded in agreement, although only one was earnest in his intentions. Vanitas had no idea what 'pet' Hades was pretending to be taking on a walk, but whatever it was had clearly begun turning Thebes into its sandpit. Both Donald and Goofy were heroic at heart and would charge in without a second thought to defend the helpless citizens of Thebes, and that would be his best chance at escape. Right now he would be too easy to spot shimmying down the mountain with the duo hot on his tail, but the winding alleys of Thebes would allow him to disappear like a rat into the sewers.

Looks like Hades' plan was already in motion.

Thebes had already been hit hard by the time the three got down from the mountain.

The sound of screaming hit Vanitas' ears even before they crossed the borders of the city, and rubble already littered the pathways from destroyed buildings. He, Donald and Goofy sprinted up the Big Olive towards the Agora, dodging falling roof tiles and bricks left and right as structures crumbled like bread around them. A small child was carried in the arms of her mother, their togas blowing in the wind as the trio shot past them towards the source of the chaos.

Vanitas had never encountered a monster like this before, but he was able to pull a name from the dark crevasses of his heart. The beast was enormous, easily towering above the tallest buildings and covered with shiny emerald scales that reflected the afternoon sun like gemstones. A long tail whipped around and sliced through the middle of a building, sending blocks of stone and marble flying through the air and adding more screams into the air like a symphony. Three serpentine necks rippled as if moving with separate minds and ended in a reptilian head with vicious teeth. The beast was drooling with hunger and tried to snap a child up from the rubble of their home, only for the kid to be snatch away and out of reach by a heroic bystander.
"I thought this place was protected by a force field!" Donald exclaimed, the party screeching to a halt before they got too close. "How did the Hydra get in?!"

Vanitas winced as the beast let out a wailing shriek and clamped both hands over his ears in pain. The Agora was little more than a bombsite at that point and the Hydra was getting bored. With no targets to demolish within reach it already had its beady eyes set on the next big thing. It lifted its heavy legs and stomped forward, ploughing on towards the next block of houses. If it were allowed to continue then the buildings would fall like dominoes. The damage would be catastrophic.

"It doesn't matter, we've taken this thing out before!" Goofy yelled above the cacophony, raising his shield just in time to block a slab of marble before it smacked him in the face. "Come on Sora, let's do it together, just like we used to!"

"Yeah!"

Both Donald and Goofy steeled their nerves and charged into battle ready to slay the beast. It was only when they realised that the familiar sound of oversized boots against the dirt wasn't accompanying them that they stopped, skidding to a halt and turning back to Vanitas. The black-haired Keyblade wielder was frozen in place, his yellow eyes glued to the Hydra as it raised one foot and brought it down on a market stall, crushing the wood beneath its toes like it was nothing. That was someone's entire livelihood gone in an instant with no remorse.

"Sora, come on!"

Vanitas flinched and came back out of his stupor to find both Donald and Goofy giving him expectant looks while the Hydra continued to rampage behind them. His mouth felt so dry, the blazing sun now icy cold against his skin.

"I… can't," Vanitas admitted. "I can't let Sora have control of my body, it's not fair!"

"You think this is fair?" Donald squawked, gesturing behind him at the absolute destruction that lay to their rear. "What about all these people?! We can't just sit back and watch while Thebes is demolished! Pull yourself together!"

"Aww, who are we kidding," Goofy huffed, an uncharacteristic frown on his face. "Riku said you had changed but you're just as rotten as you were before. Let's go Donald, we can do this by ourselves!"

The two exchanged a nod of determination and charged into battle, but not before Goofy slid Vanitas a look of harrowing disappointment. Somehow that felt worse than all the other insults he had endured – he could stomach being called a liar, a monster, a savage. All those words had some truth behind them, but seeing someone look at him like they expected him to be better than all of that and he had failed sent shards of ice into his heart.

Vanitas shook his head before he let his emotions get out of control. He was a Seeker of Darkness, he had slain his brother and toppled worlds since the day he took his first breath. If they had expected anything less than pure malice from him then they were the fools. He watched the duo power towards the Hydra, Goofy hurling his shield at the beast's leathery hide and Donald casting Thundaga to strike all three heads at once. Vanitas turned on his heel and bolted away without another word.

He only made it down one block before his legs brought him to a halt.

He stood for a moment in complete stillness, yellow eyes closed gently as if he was asleep, and
listened to the sounds that surrounded him. The Vanitas that was among the ranks of the Seekers of Darkness would've been filled with giddy glee at the screaming and wailing, he would've smirked at the screams that were cut short and laughed as the yelling morphed into sobbing. He would've danced upon the ruins of Thebes with a spring in his step and a twinkle in his eye, but now…

Vanitas tried to pin the blame on Sora – the two were already coming dangerously close to sharing memories so it was possible that they were sharing emotions – but he just couldn't do it. Not completely. Vanitas had never experienced emotions like 'guilt' or 'shame' but those words seemed to fit the typhoon raging in his heart. The more he thought about his actions the more his resolve wavered. He didn't owe the people of Thebes anything, not a second thought or a single dime, but he was trading their livelihoods for his freedom. Even if he got what he craved he would still have Sora tagging along, and the brunette had already demonstrated his ability to force his hand.

Please don't do this. Don't leave them.

Vanitas looked down at his right hand, feeling the weight of the Void Gear resting in his palm even though the Keyblade was yet to be summoned. When he had attempted to abandon Kairi and Xion, Sora had physically prevented him from leaving them to the wrath of the Heartless, and he had stopped his swing from connecting with Riku's skull on Destiny Islands. Vanitas expected to see that pale hand wrapped around his wrist like a ball and chain, but only his own red and black glove stared back. He clenched his fist tightly until he felt his veins bulging under his skin; suddenly those colours seemed so vile to him. Sora hadn't tried to stop him from running from Donald and Goofy. Vanitas had stopped himself.

I won't stop you this time. I know you'll do what's right.

Vanitas felt sick, the nausea in his stomach rolling around inside him like the foreign emotions were poisoning him. He groaned and dug his fingers into his scalp, trying to find some stability in a world that no longer made any sense to him. He opened his mouth and let out a frustrated yell that joined with the orchestra of people still trapped in the decimated buildings and threw himself back towards the Agora before he could change his mind. The Void Gear appeared in his right hand without missing a beat, thrumming in time with his footsteps as if it was approving of his decision. The Keyblade had gone too long without sinking its teeth into tender flesh, and Vanitas was ready to make up for the lost time.

He turned the corner to see Donald and Goofy still valiantly battling the Hydra. They had barely made a scratch in the chain mail that was the beast's hide but had at least distracted it from its rampage and halted the destruction of Thebes before it could progress past the point of no return. Donald managed to snipe a well-timed fireball right into the mouth of one of the heads as it opened to scream, scorching its throat with flame and pissing it off even more than before. Goofy jumped in front of the mage and raised his shield, using his weight to stand fast against the Hydra's attack as it sought revenge against the duck. The two were holding their ground well, but it was only a matter of time before someone ran out of MP.

Vanitas readied his Keyblade before spotting Phil jumping up and down and waving his arms around, trying to get his attention. The satyr was yelling something but he could barely make out the words past the cacophony of destruction that rained all around them. He shot the satyr a confused look and Phil face palmed hard before cupping his hands around his mouth and bellowing as loud as he could.

"GET UP ON THE HYDRA'S BACK!"

Vanitas' yellow eyes darted back towards the Hydra as he finally understood the instructions. The beast was so preoccupied with the mage and knight that its rear was completely unprotected, save for
its undulating tail. His face shifted into a dark grin and he sprinted up towards the beast, careful to
dodge the flailing whip of a tail to avoid alerting the monster of his presence before he had a chance
to strike. He caught sight of Phil lifting a gigantic urn out of the corner of his eye, the satyr's knees
wobbling under the weight but eyes filled with determination. Vanitas nodded to him and jumped up
onto the Hydra's spine, feeling the muscles underneath rippling with the landing and all three heads
turning to eye him up like a predator surveying the main course.

"NOW!"

Phil tossed the urn up into the air as hard as he could towards the battlefield. As the jar soared
through the air Vanitas joined it in flight, intercepting the urn's trajectory and slamming it into the
spine of the Hydra before it could react. He heard a sharp crack as the urn shattered with the impact,
each of the three heads screaming in pain before collapsing to the ground. As his feet reconnected
with the monster's hide he could feel it breathing beneath him – the thing was down but not out, and
they needed to strike now before it could pull itself back together. He slid down one of the necks, not
without heavily standing between the beast's eyes and smirking as it winced in pain, and hopped
back to solid ground next to Donald and Goofy who had witnessed the whole thing.

"SORA!"

Sora flashed the two a toothy grin and gave them a victorious thumbs up as he stood in front of the
downed Hydra.

"You're not gonna fight this thing without me, are you?"

"Not a chance!" Donald quacked as the Hydra picked itself back up, shaking its head and yellow
slatted eyes laser-focused on the trio in rage. Sora summoned the Kingdom Key into his left hand
and readied both for the upcoming battle. Even though Thebes lay around him in rubble it still felt so
good to be fighting alongside his friends again. The three half-pints were back together.

The Hydra reared its head back like a cobra ready to strike but found its jaws clenched around the
solid metal of Goofy's shield before it could retaliate. It's needle-thin teeth chomped down on the
metal but was unable to leave even the smallest puncture holes in the reinforced metal. Donald
unleashed a frigid "Blizzaga!" which promptly froze the head of the serpent solid and encased it in a
layer of ice. Sora could feel the cool air hitting his face from the spell and flowing through his black
hair, relieving some of the pain from the sun exposure. Vanitas was going to have
some killer sunburn later.

Sora bent his knees and spread his Keyblades wide, lunging forward with all the force he could
muster and sliced the two weapons across each other like a giant pair of scissors. The leathery skin of
the Hydra cracked and splintered now that the Blizzaga had frozen it, severing all three heads in one
clean motion. The heads shattered in a cascade of icicles against the stone, but all three members of
Keyblade Heroes 3 knew that the Hydra wouldn't be downed so easily. The body of the beast
staggered backwards before the stumps left behind writhed and sprouted pillars of green flesh,
eventually culminating in more heads in numbers that far outweighed the three that had been
gnashing at them before.

"We need to take them all out at once!" Sora yelled. The Hydra might have the ability to grow back
two heads every time one was cut off, but it couldn't regenerate itself forever. They just needed to
force the monster to its limits and it would fall just like the rest that had come before it. The three
nodded to each other, understanding passing between them without speaking any words. Sora
dodged a few heads that attempted to close their jaws around his head and rip it clean off and darted
back to Donald and Goofy, the three of them steeling themselves in a formation they had used many
times before. He raised both Keyblades above his head, the shiny metal of each weapon reflecting
the light of the sun as they vibrated in his hands with restrained energy, and both Donald and Goofy raised their own weapons in support.

"TRINITY LIMIT!"

The Hydra didn't have a chance to retaliate. The force of the Limit activating thrust the trio up into the air allowing Sora to beat the teeth of his Keyblades into the beast's hide in a spinning motion, the long reach of each blade striking multiple heads at once and sending a couple teeth flying through the air like macabre confetti. Donald's staff found itself jammed into the bulbous eye of one head sending the Hydra reeling back in pain, followed by a barrage of Firaga's that sizzled against the hide and filled the air with the smell of burnt flesh. Goofy smacked his shield upwards into the chin of one head, snapping the Hydra's head back as it's eyes rolled in its sockets with the sudden concussion. It tried to snap at the trio but the three flew past each head before it could connect, needle-like fangs closing down on nothing more than thin air.

The Hydra took a few steps backwards as the repeated abuse forced it to retreat, its hind legs trying to find solid ground but only sinking into the piles of rubble than now littered the streets. Donald took the opportunity to cast Ultima using the life force of his friends, a spell that had been out of scope without both Goofy and Sora by his side. The sparks of magic that exploded from the tip of his staff homed in on the Hydra like heat-seeking missiles and burst against its emerald skin leaving scorch marks behind. Goofy spun his shield in his hand like a roman candle, glimmering yellow Drive Orbs cascading out and washing over the Hydra before it could catch its breath.

As Sora harshly landed on the ground, his knees screaming in pain with the sudden impact, he tightened his grip on the hilts of his Keyblades until the metal in his palms threatened to sear his skin with the heat pulsing through the weapons. He clenched his yellow eyes closed and thrust both Keyblades at the Hydra, the magic encapsulated in each weapon charged up with the repeated strikes against the monster, and pushed with as much force as he could muster. The vibrating of the Keyblades reverberated down his arms as the magic inside finally released from the tip of each blade, forming twin streams of light that pierced through the base of the Hydra's necks. The beast stood no chance. The barrage shot through one side and out the other, quickly eating away at emerald flesh as if made of acid until the necks bloodlessly cleaved away from the body.

The multitude of heads crashed down to the ground, mouths open and flailing as if screaming silently without a connection to the lungs. As each neck slowly became motionless the body thrashed around in pain, trying to find any way to slaughter the trio that had felled it without luck. The trunk-like legs were no longer able to support its weight and the body eventually crumpled to the ground, tail twitching until the beast finally fell still. Sora paused for a moment, fearful that the Hydra was simply about to sprout more heads from its neck, but allowed a sigh of relief to pass his lips as silence befell the Agora. That silence was then broken by cheering as he, Donald and Goofy exchanged excited high fives at their victory over the monster. He couldn't stop smiling, and neither could they.

"Is everyone OK?!!" yelled Hercules as he swooped down to the ground on the back of Pegasus, his shimmering white steed. The horse's hooves clacked against the broken paving stones as he jogged to a halt, beating his powerful wings to slow their descent and sending gusts of wind across the Agora that kicked dust into the air. The demigod hopped of the stallion's back and rubbed his neck in thanks, Phil also jumping down but in a significantly less graceful manner due to the longer fall distance with his short goat legs.

"I mean, I guess that depends on who you asked," Vanitas remarked, eyeing up the miles of damaged buildings. "We're fine, if that's what you mean."

"Thank goodness," Herc sighed in relief. "I was so busy evacuating the citizens that I wasn't able to
take on the Hydra. It's a good thing you three were here!"

"Ah, we've taken that thing on before anyway!" Donald insisted, basking in the praise. "No sweat!"

"I have to wonder," Goofy mused, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "We've beaten the Hydra before, so how did it get into the city? Wasn't there a force field protecting it?"

Vanitas' face turned a sickly grey at the way the conversation was turning. He was a gnat's breath away from being found out, and he was standing in range of two deadly Guardians of Light and one demigod that could flatten him before he could blink. He could lie, just pin the blame on Hades and no one would question him. He could just feign innocence, after all he had never laid eyes on the Olympus Stone and the first time his feet touched the clouds of Olympus was earlier that day. He had one hundred alibis, he just needed to pick one.

Vanitas reached inside his pocket and produced the Olympus Stone, still vibrating softly in his hand.

"The Olympus Stone…" Hercules whispered, his blue eyes wide with shock at the revelation. "It was you?"

Vanitas didn't know what had caused him to admit to his actions instead of vomiting out the slew of excuses, but he was no coward. He had chosen to side with Hades and then chosen to place himself between the Hydra and the people of Thebes after the plan went south. It was his mistake and his mistake only, and he had to face the consequences of his decision.

"Yes, it was me," he admitted, his yellow eyes cast downwards in shame. "Hades told me that if I stole the Olympus Stone he would create a distraction so I could escape. I wanted to be free so badly and Hades was the only one on my side, so I agreed."

"I knew we couldn't trust you!" Donald yelled, pointing the tip of his staff at the raven Keyblade wielder as it crackled with restrained lightning. "You're still with the Seekers of Darkness!"

"What, no!" Vanitas insisted. "The only side I'm on right now is my own."

"But why?" Goofy questioned with disappointment in his eyes. "Everyone trusted you."

"Hey, don't be too hard on him," Hercules interrupted, feeling a little bad for Vanitas as he was scolded by his friends. "Hades can be really manipulative, we all know that."

"No," Vanitas stated, bringing his eyes up to meet the demigod's gaze with a look of resolution. "I knew what I was agreeing to. I knew that people would be hurt but I didn't care. I thought my freedom was worth it, but… I was wrong. I'm no hero, but my hate should be directed to those who actually deserve it."

Vanitas took a deep breath, wincing as he heard his voice shake a little with shame.

"I'm… sorry."

He felt physical pain as those dreaded words crossed his lips. He winced and scrunched his eyes closed, readying himself for a slap from the demigod that would no doubt send him flying back to the top of Mount Olympus, but the blow never came. He opened one eye hesitantly as a firm hand rested itself on his shoulder in solidarity, only to find Hercules smiling back at him with a warm grin.

"Well, that settles it then!" the demigod proclaimed. "All is forgiven."

"Wait, are you serious?" Phil demanded, trotting up to his star pupil in bewilderment. "Did you see
what he did to the city?"

"Hades did this to the city," Hercules stressed, "not Vanitas. Even if Vanitas knew what he was agreeing to, it was still Hades who destroyed Thebes. Again. Besides, I thought you said that admitting your shortcomings was a part of being a hero?"

Phil spluttered as Hercules used his words against him, but was unable to come up with a suitable retort. The satyr huffed in frustration and crossed his arms angrily.

"Stupid heroes and their stupid loopholes... Alright kid, guess you did everything I asked you to," he agreed. "You made it to the top of Mount Olympus and back, you worked together to take out a dangerous monster, plus you learned a lesson in humility."

Phil produced a small ID card and handed it to Vanitas. He had to bend down to match the satyr's short stature, turning the card over in his hand as he inspected it. It was about the same size as the 'postcard' he procured in Traverse Town but was laminated so the ink was protected from whatever crazy situations a hero was likely to get himself into. The card was emblazoned with the words 'πρώτη άδεια ήρωα', whatever that meant, followed by his name scribbled in English characters.

"I hereby dub thee Junior Hero!" Phil declared with pride. Hercules gave a small golf clap in response, right as another building toppled to the ground behind them with the worst possible timing. Vanitas winced but accepted the accolade quickly before they changed their minds.

"Just remember, Vanitas," Hercules stated, his eyes now suddenly clouded by an uncharacteristic seriousness. "The brightest light shines in the deepest darkness. Even if it all seems hopeless there's always a way out, but if you let your light go then you'll never fill the void it will leave behind."

Vanitas opened his mouth to snap back at the hero with something witty and sarcastic, but couldn't find the words. He had received this lecture before after Cloud had broken up the scuffle between him and Leon, back in Radiant Garden. At the time he found the words to be condescending like an adult trying to lecture a child, like someone who was trying to change who he was without concern for his own feelings. Now, after everything he had been through, Vanitas couldn't help but feel that there may be a sliver of truth behind those words.

"Now, you two," Phil continued, turning to Donald and Goofy who had been watching with shocked expressions as Vanitas was applauded for his betrayal. "You never graduated to full-time heroes, did you?"

"Huh, I guess we never did!" Goofy remarked as Donald shrugged at him. "I suppose it just slipped our minds, what with the Seekers of Darkn-"

Goofy's explanation was abruptly cut off as Donald tugged him down to his level and slammed his hand over the knight's mouth with a whispered "World Order!" Vanitas wondered if the duo would receive the recognition they truly deserved if they were just willing to divulge the details of their adventures. He couldn't imagining sacrificing his pride for the sake of protecting the innocence of the worlds.

"Well, I think that Herc would agree you've both earned your wings, right?" Phil stated with a smile, elbowing Hercules in the leg and receiving a nod of agreement. "Are you ready to receive your promotion?"

Donald and Goofy ceased in their friendly scuffling at Phil's words. They exchanged looks of disappointment with each other but their faces soon lit up with mirth as identical thoughts crossed
their minds. Donald released his hold on the knight and the two stood at attention and saluted.

"Negative, sir!" Goofy barked. "Not without the whole platoon!"

"Yeah, it just wouldn't be the same without Sora! We'll graduate together," Donald agreed, the duo throwing Vanitas a knowing look and a mischievous wink.

Sora tried his best to return the smile, but his yellow eyes were clouded with grief. He knew he should feel happy that his best friends were willing to wait for him so they could graduate together as a team, but the feeling was hollow in his chest. He couldn't ask them to put their lives on hold for him because he decided to get himself into trouble, yet they weren't the only ones doing so. Riku, Kairi, everyone he had left behind were stuck in stasis because he threw his heart into the depths of darkness, and it wasn't the first time. It would somehow be easier if everyone decided to move on without him, but the knowledge that so many people were ready to put their futures aside for him just left him feeling unworthy. Sora had done nothing to warrant such devotion, especially when he couldn't recall a time he had done the same for them.

Donald and Goofy gasped as a single tear ran down Vanitas' face before he snapped back into awareness and scrubbed his cheek like he was trying to erase all evidence of the emotion. Before he could protest there were two sets of arms wrapped around him, squeezing him for all he was worth and trying to wring the sadness out of him.

"Aww, don't be sad! We're here for you!"

"Get off me! I swear to GOD!"

"Yeah, we're not going anywhere!"

"Someone help, they're invading my personal bubble!"

"Don't bottle your emotions up, it's important to talk about how you feel."

"DONALD, I'LL TURN YOU INTO FOIE GRAS IF YOU DON'T UNHAND ME RIGHT NOW!"

Hercules shook his head and crossed his arms in amusement as Vanitas tried to wriggle out of the grip of his friends to no avail. He was a strange one, so different from Sora and yet so similar. The spark of adventure in his eye and the weight of the Keyblade in his hand were identical, but the shimmer of light in his heart was so faint that the demigod was sure that he would find his place as a villain, rather than a hero. Still, he had vowed to assist anyone who displayed a desire to help others, and although Vanitas' actions had hurt a lot of people and destroyed Thebes, Herc could still sense a glimmer of potential within the black-haired boy. He and Phil could teach him how to use it, how to nurture and protect it, but it was ultimately down to Vanitas to decide if it was worth fighting for. That light could become a powerful force that would fell the strongest demons, or it could be tossed aside and replaced with something evil that would swallow anything in its path.

Hercules just hoped that Vanitas would choose the right path to walk down.

Naminé took a deep breath in, held it in her lungs until her head started to spin, and slowly breathed out.

Pins and needles shot up her calves after remaining in the same position for so long. She adjusted her legs, bare shins grazing against the rough carpet as she sat cross-legged on the floor, and placed her hands palm-down on her knees. Raspberry scented smoke curled around her nose as she took
another stabilising breath, the flickering scented candles casting moving shadows across the room as if Naminé was surrounded by fairies dancing to a beat that she couldn't hear. She leaned her head back so her face turned up to the ceiling and closed her eyes, trying to relax. Tension seeped out of every muscle in her body as she almost sagged downwards, slipping into a deep meditation. The only sounds that echoed around the empty room were her own breathing and the occasional crackle from the candle wicks as they continued devouring their wax in a cruel ouroboros.

…

Naminé's expression shifted from one of serenity to one of frustration, and she adjusted her position yet again.

This was a position she had promised she would never put herself in again, but it had become more and more common ever since that first message crept through on her Gummiphone. The message signalling both the end of their suffering and the end of the peace that had come with it. Naminé was immensely relieved to see Sora's username pop up on the group chat for the first time in months, long after her heart had begun to lose hope of seeing his chocolate hair or aqua blue eyes again, but the tendrils of dread that came with it had not withdrawn from the edges of her thoughts. She knew that the path to recovery was fraught with danger and would hurt long before it would get better. She had been right.

Naminé huffed in discontentment and adjusted her legs again.

She had been appalled at herself for thinking of Sora's reappearance as anything less than something to celebrate, but her mind wouldn't allow her to be free of her anxiety. She had been raised to constantly look over one shoulder, that her entire existence hung by a thread that could be cut at any moment. Even though that was no longer the case, old habits die hard. When they had found Sora tied up in the body of one of their worst enemies there was a dark part of her heart that was happy to find out she had been right, that things were not going to be OK and that her warning had gone unheeded. That part of herself was kept locked away in a little box in her mind, and would never be revealed to anyone. She was ashamed to admit that the thoughts she held towards the boy who her heart was inexplicably tied to had been so disturbing.

Naminé groaned and gave up. She wasn't getting anywhere like this. Her thoughts wouldn't stop racing and she needed to be completely calm for this to work.

She lifted her head back up and reopened her icy blue eyes, blinking as the bright candlelight stung her retinas in the dark room. Naminé had promised herself that she wasn't going to try and interfere with Sora's memories anymore. She was done with that part of her life, done with being a tool to be used for a higher cause that had no interest in who she was or what she wanted. She was her own person now with her own friends and her own memories, and for all she still maintained a strong connection with Sora she no longer considered herself to be merely an extension of him. Her life didn't revolve around the brunette as it once did, and her powers were now meaningless in a world where she was no longer considered a 'Nobody', both in the metaphorical and literal sense.

Yet, here she was, messing with Sora's memories again. Or rather, she was trying to comb through them. Naminé was the only piece of Sora's heart not to have received a Keyblade, although she knew her nerves were too fragile to allow her to stand on the front line like everyone else. She had detested herself for staying in the safety of the Realm of Light while her friends dragged themselves through the Realm of Darkness and into the belly of the beast to find the smallest hint of Sora's presence, but her talents were better suited elsewhere. She was of no use to the Guardians of Light dead at the hands of a Heartless, not now that she had a heart of her own.

Naminé reached out and grasped the cup of peppermint tea that rested on the carpet in front of her.
The beverage was now closer to room temperature than when she first brewed it, but she preferred it that way. She took a sip of the drink, allowing the tea to swill around her mouth and the minty flavour to excite her taste buds, before swallowing it down. Her Replica body really had no need for sustenance from food or drink but her life in the World That Never Was had been so devoid of colour or interest that she took every opportunity to experience everything that the world outside her sterile white cage had to offer. The tea helped her sleep and it calmed her nerves, plus it made her room smell really good.

She rested the cup back on the carpet and shimmied back into position, closing her eyes once more. She was sticking her feet back into Sora's memories even though she was determined to leave that part of her life behind in order to try and locate his body. Naminé might be unable to fight the Heartless but that didn't mean she couldn't help in other ways. She had spent so much time in the brunette's head during his year-long coma that she practically knew the place like the back of her hand, and she was hoping to uncover some locked-away memories that would reveal what had befallen Sora while he was lost to the darkness. He couldn't recall the events that had torn his heart from his physical form and left him dependant on Vanitas for survival, but the chain of memories was near unbreakable. She just had to follow the thread all the way back and the truth would reveal itself to her.

She just had to give it a little… encouragement.

Sora's memories had always been a pain in the ass to comb through, but the web that now surrounded his heart was near impenetrable as if the strands were made of steel rather than silk. The last time Naminé had delved into the ocean of Sora's heart, his memories had been fractured and scrambled like eggs after she was coerced into snapping the threads that tied them together, but the memories themselves were at least coherent. The memories that she encountered during this dive were so distorted that they barely seemed to slot together, as if half the pieces were from a different puzzle entirely. The brunette seemed to remember himself in places he couldn't have possibly been – the Land of Departure during the Mark of Mastery where Terra had first been tempted by the power of darkness; kidnapping King Mickey in Neverland; standing by Xehanort's side in the Keyblade Graveyard.

Likewise, Sora's heart seemed to be letting go of memories that should've meant a lot to him. The trail left behind was faint enough to follow, but it was like the memories had gone wandering over to somewhere or someone else. There was barely anything for Naminé to work with. Ienzo had already discovered that Sora's heart was severely damaged and was missing three quarters of its mass, but she should at least be able to decipher what was left. It was like looking at the heart of an infant just born to the world and unable to make sense of anything around it. Naminé didn't know how to help him like this.

For all intents and purposes, the individual known as 'Sora' had effectively ceased to exist.

Naminé groaned and slapped herself on the cheek. She was doing it again. She knew that Sora repelled all attempts to define him by the established parameters of the universe. He was a force of nature on his own and there was no reason to expect him to play by the predetermined rules; otherwise Naminé herself would never have existed. A Nobody born of Kairi's heart and Sora's body. Nobodies were never meant to exist at all, so her own twisted existence was an affront to nature itself, plus she had no idea how Sora knew she was trapped in the Final World in order to tell the others to rescue her. Naminé had accepted her fate to endlessly wander the vacant salt flats for the rest of eternity until even her name was lost from memory, but Sora had still found a way.

Naminé felt a weak smile cross her face. Sora had no idea how much of a cornerstone he was to their fractured friendship group: his devil-may-care nature and fearless approach often got him into trouble
but as just as quickly got him out of it. All she had to think was *what would Sora do* and everything would be alright. He found a way to succeed despite the odds stacked against him, and she could too. She tilted her head back once more, her long blonde hair tickled the small of her back as it pooled behind her, and gently closed her eyes.

Naminé would just have to keep trying. She would try and try again until Sora was back home safe. After all, he had done the same for her.
This chapter actually ended up going a completely different direction at one point. Vanitas was going to have a flashback of being stuck inside the pod, but I decided this story just didn’t have enough suffering in it. I like this version much better lol

On any other day, Roxas would’ve wolfed down his ratatouille in record time. Now that the plate of steaming food was sitting in front of him, he couldn’t find the desire to eat.

He stabbed his silver fork into the dish, tender juices flowing from the pricks in the vegetables like rivers of gold, then sighed and placed his cutlery down in defeat. His blue eyes scoured Tram Common like spot lights, searching for the smallest sign of gravity-defying black hair that would announce the arrival of their unwelcome guest. A floral parasol shaded the table and its inhabitants, protecting his eyes from the radiant orange sun that hung low in perpetual twilight. The scent of delicate flavours that wafted across Roxas’ nose every time the door to Le Grand Bistrot was thrown open by their clumsy waiter would’ve normally had him drooling in excitement, but he just couldn’t find his appetite.

There had been no sign of Vanitas for over an hour, and Roxas was getting antsy.

“Are you gonna be OK?”

Roxas sighed heavily and met the gaze of his worried companions. Matching pairs of aqua blue eyes stared back from Xion and Naminé, both with uncertainty on their faces and hair glowing like halos against the setting sun. Xion was almost finished with her sirloin steak but Naminé had only ordered her usual peppermint tea, her slender fingers curled around the porcelain mug as rivulets of steam danced up into the cool air. Roxas could feel Lea’s eyes burning a hole through the back of his head, his plate almost licked clean and stomach already grumbling for more. The four frequented this spot so often that Uncle Scrooge kept a table open for them, but the usual jovial atmosphere was replaced by unspoken tension. Roxas wasn’t the only one whose thoughts were consumed with doubt.

“I will be when he turns up,” he grumbled. “I still can’t believe Yen Sid let him walk around Thebes on his own like that…”

“I don’t think Vanitas believes it either!” Lea laughed in response, trying to lighten the mood. “I wonder if Donald and Goofy let him keep all his limbs.”

Roxas felt a smile creep across his face as Naminé almost shot tea out of her nose. His friends were the light of his life, the reason he got out of bed in the morning and faced a world that never wanted him. Roxas supposed he could relate to Vanitas on those grounds, but the insurmountable hate that raged in his heart refused to allow any other emotion to exist. Vanitas and Roxas were more closely linked than he initially believed, and not just because of Sora. The black-haired Keyblade wielder was responsible for Roxas and Ventus’ shared face, having slain his twin in battle and forced him to retreat within Sora’s heart for safety. The two conjoined hearts caused Roxas to take on Ven’s appearance instead of Sora’s, though maybe that was for the best. Two Soras was already more than enough, they really didn’t need a third.
“… Do you guys think that what everyone is saying is true?” Roxas asked quietly. “Do you think he’s changed?”

“I dunno about that…” Xion replied, swallowing the last bite of her steak and neatly resting her cutlery down. “He did help Kairi and I fight the Guard Armour in Traverse Town, but we still barely know him. For all we know he could still be loyal to the Seekers of Darkness, though I doubt it now that Xehanort isn’t leading it anymore.”

“Mmm,” Lea agreed, his mane of red hair bobbing as he nodded in agreement. Two ladies dressed in extravagant clothing gave him a wide berth as his hair took up most of the space between their table and the next. “Isa told me something, but I can’t for the life of me remember what it was…”

“Was it ‘Lea, please get out of my house’?”

“Oh my God, no!” Lea let out a deep bellowing laugh. “Not this time! He said: ‘a declawed cat still has its fangs.’ I guess he means that just because Vanitas has been knocked down a few pegs doesn’t mean that he isn’t dangerous. Gotta still treat him like a threat.”

Xion’s eyes flickered out over the mulling crowd at the redhead’s words, brushing her raven bangs out of her eyes in thought. Lea was absolutely correct: Vanitas may be reluctantly cooperating but he wasn’t their friend, not even close. He was still a wildcard, a bomb ready to explode, a mine hidden below the surface. She didn’t like walking on eggshells around him, and Vanitas probably felt the same way, but it was inevitable. They still knew so little about him other than his connection to Sora and Ventus; he was still an enigma. Then again, he had only just become familiar with the concept of being his own person. Perhaps Vanitas was just now learning about himself too.

“You know,” she stated out of the blue. “Vanitas and I were in the Real Organization XIII together. He would always stalk around in the shadows like a gargoyle and never hid his hatred for Xehanort. I don’t think he was particularly loyal to him or the Organization, so there’s nothing to indicate that he’s still a Seeker of Darkness. He hasn’t earned a second chance, but maybe he’s earned the benefit of the doubt?”

Roxas sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, the smell of sizzling meat and sweet desserts kissing his nostrils with each breath.

“Well, we’ll find out when he gets here!” Lea stated with an air of finality. “No use sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves, we’ll have our answers soon enough. Also, are you gonna finish that?”

Roxas shook his head and pushed his plate towards Lea who was eyeing up the remains of his meal with hunger in his eyes. Out of everyone at the table, the redhead was the only one who actually needed to eat to live. Roxas, Xion and Naminé all possessed Replica bodies, porcelain-white puppets with no features that they could drive around and kept their hearts tethered to the Realm of Light. Their bodies didn’t require things like sleep or water to function, but they could still enjoy the pleasures of a hearty meal and a good night’s rest. Besides, how could he resist the scents that radiated out of Le Grand Bistrot every time he walked past?

“Sometimes I feel like we barely know Sora, never mind Vanitas,” Roxas hissed. “I spent half my life living in his heart but we’ve barely spoken more than a couple of sentences to each other! Every time he just gets whisked away from us, how long are we going to have to wait?!”

Roxas slammed his fists into the table in frustration, the flatware clattering together as the metal frame vibrated with the impact. Several muffled conversations around the four came to a complete halt and were replaced with stares at the blond’s outburst. He groaned and put his head in his hands, the intricate metalwork of the table digging into his elbows uncomfortably.
“Whoa, chill!” Lea insisted, rubbing Roxas’ back in consolation. “We all want a turn at kicking Vanitas’ ass, but at least wait until he gets here! Don’t take it out on the table!”

“I know, but…” Roxas replied, his fists tugging on his unruly spikes of dirty blonde hair. “All we’ve done for the last three months is wait. I want to do something now!”

Xion could empathise with Roxas’ frustration. Her relationship with Sora was still a work in progress – for a while the only image she had of the brunette was built from the few building blocks afforded to her by Xemnas, who painted him as a reckless, arrogant child way out of his depth. She knew now that this description was extremely biased and couldn’t be further from the truth, but Xion had lived with that fake impression of Sora for such a long time that she was desperate to know the true personality of the boy whose image she was created in, whose memories she had lived through as if they were her own. She could count the words the two had exchanged on one hand, and some days it felt like the brunette was a figment of her imagination: a phantasm that flickered into view only when she looked away and disappeared by the morning light.

“Actually, speaking of that, did you make any progress with Sora’s memories last night?” Xion asked, turning her head to Naminé who had remained silent throughout the entire display.

“Wha- oh, no,” she replied, snapping out of her reverie and taking another sip of her peppermint tea. “Sorry, I don’t have anything new to report.”

“At least you’re doing something,” Roxas groaned. “I feel like the rest of us are just sitting around.”

Naminé didn’t know the right words to say. Well, she did know the words to say, but she had promised not to say them. Every excruciating inch of progress made into Sora’s memories had been reported to Ienzo through Isa, seeing as Ienzo never figured out how to use a Gummiphone, and he had convinced her to hold her tongue until they had more information. Isa was concerned that jumping the gun too soon would just cause more harm than good, either sending the Guardians of Light into a panic or putting too much strain on Vanitas’ already over-burdened heart. Still, Naminé could feel the uncontrollable urge to spurt out everything she knew welling up at the back of her throat every time pained anger crossed Roxas’ eyes, every time Lea tried to hide his fear behind laughter, and every time Xion stared into the distance as if her heart was miles away.

Naminé subtly freed her Gummiphone from the pocket of her white dress and opened the Messenger app. She knew it was rude to text at the table, but her guilt was eating her up inside. She could never understand how Mickey managed to be so secretive when he withheld the information regarding Riku’s whereabouts from Sora; the rock in her stomach only grew with time, but she knew it would be disastrous if she released it before they were ready.

She flicked over to the private chat that Isa had added her to, and quickly typed out a message before her apprehension could stay her hands.

white_witch: are you certain i cant talk about what weve found?
white_witch: this is eating me up inside
Luna_Diviner: One moment, I’ll ask.
Luna_Diviner: Thanks for waiting, Tron is very insistent that we refrain from speculating until we have the full scope of the situation.
Luna_Diviner: He’s running a simulation as we speak using the info you gave us. He’s concerned that some of our more ‘impulsive’ friends might jump to conclusions too soon.
white_witch: you can just say roxas you know
Luna_Diviner: Quite right, Roxas may jump to conclusions.
Luna_Diviner: Actually, that was something I wanted to speak to you about, you’re planning on taking Vanitas and Sora to the mansion, aren’t you?
white_witch: ye
white_witch: that place has a lot of memories tied to it
white_witch: literally
Luna_Diviner: If you’re having problems deciphering Sora’s memories, maybe it’s worth trying it inside the mansion? The two of you spent a lot of time there, after all.

Naminé considered Isa’s messages. The decision to travel back to the deserted grounds of the mansion was not made lightly, in fact it had almost torn a rift in their friendship group. Lea and Xion had very little emotional connection to the dilapidated building so merely saw it as one of many tools at their disposal. Roxas and Naminé, however, knew the evil that lay beneath the pristine white wallpaper and shattered tables. She spent over a year caged within her room, staring out the windows at the town that lay beyond the forest and covering her walls with drawings to try and block out the sterile white paint. Roxas had been forced to fight his best friend and then give up his life for someone he hardly knew and who was never intended to remember him.

Still, she knew that Isa was right. The suffering would no doubt be fanned back to life from a tiny spark to a roaring inferno, but it couldn’t compare to the pain that Sora was likely facing at that very moment. The brunette would keep a smile on his face and a skip in his step to keep his friends from worrying, but most of their group knew him well enough to tell when he was lying. Naminé was dreading having to face her prison again, but it was a drop in the ocean compared to everything Sora had put himself through. She really didn’t want to have to stick him in a pod again, but maybe the sight of the icy-white flower bud would be enough. It would have to be enough.

Luna_Diviner: Oh, and Naminé?
Luna_Diviner: Good luck, I really do mean that.

Naminé smiled and returned her Gummiphone to her pocket. As much as her heart wanted to wallow in grief, Sora would just shrug it off with a goofy smile. After everything he had done for her, after he had somehow found her lost heart within the Final World and brought her back, the least she could do was trust that he would find a way.

“I might be the only one, but I have a good feeling about this,” Naminé remarked, drawing confused looks from her friends. “Maybe I’m being overly optimistic, but I feel like we really have an opportunity to help. I want to give it all I’ve got!”

Roxas’ eyes widened in shock at the blonde’s words, but her smile was infectious and it slowly crept onto his own face. It wasn’t enough to quell the storm raging in his heart, but a faint ray of sunshine was now peeking through the clouds and reinvigorating his hope.

“Yeah!” Roxas agreed, reaching out with one hand and holding it suspended in the air. “All for one?”

Lea and Xion grinned and placed their own hands over his, quickly joined by Naminé. The feeling of their hands resting together was like a cornerstone of strength, reminding them that they were never truly alone as long as they had each other. The burden was easier to carry if all four of them shared the load.

“And one for all!”

They lifted their arms in the air with a cheer, their determination now burning with a fierce flame that couldn’t be quenched. They were going to do this together, they were going to bring Sora back home. Vanitas wasn’t going to stop them, no one could. They were Guardians of Light, and they would be triumphant!
“Wow, I didn’t know you got dinner and a show here.”

Roxas’ blue eyes darted over to the source of the patronising comment to find a familiar figure wearing a black and red bodysuit standing in front of their table with hands on his hips. The metal jaw piece of his helmet reflected the setting sun like it was made of solid gold, and his yellow eyes glowed with an eerily light that reminded him of how Xemnas glowered at him with those same eyes.

“Vanitas,” he growled, the excitement bubbling in his chest now extinguished.

“Yes, that’s still my name,” Vanitas replied, his eyes drawn to the now empty plates that cluttered the table. “You’re eating food? Aren’t most of you guys Replicas?”

He winced as the sound of metal chairs scraping across the concrete floor like a macabre string orchestra hurt his ears, the four Guardians of Light pushing themselves up as their guest had revealed himself. The noise attracted the attention of the waiter, a lanky man with a large nose and a wild mane of ginger hair, who zipped over to the table on a pair of roller-skates and started collecting the remaining dishes.

“I take it everything was delicious then?” he asked jokingly, gesturing at the plates. Lea had almost licked the glaze off his plate with how clean it was.

“As always,” Xion laughed back. “Are they ever gonna let you in the kitchen, Linguini?”

The man turned a bright shade of maroon in embarrassment as he balanced all the plates in his arms like two wobbling towers.

“Can you imagine? I can’t cook to save my life! I’ll give your compliments to Little Chef.”

Linguini then rolled away at top speed, disappearing through the revolving door of Le Grand Bistrot with a clang. Roxas’ smile faded as he realised he would now have to deal with the elephant in the room, the one that was standing behind him and audibly tapping his foot with impatience. Vanitas’ face was usually cast in darkness from his overgrown hairstyle, but the low-hanging sun of Twilight Town deepened the shadows under his brow until his eyes near glowed yellow like a demon. Roxas could feel the desire to behead the black-haired Keyblade wielder with his Keyblades before he could lash out against them, but he tried to keep Naminé’s words in mind.

He was doing it for Sora. Vanitas was doing it for Sora. They were all doing it for Sora.

“So, what ridiculous loops are you gonna have me jump through then?” Vanitas snarled, his arms crossed defensively.

“No loops this time!” Lea interjected, sensing that Roxas was drawing dangerously close to socking Vanitas in the jaw. “Actually, we’ve got something planned that you might enjoy for once.”

The tension in Vanitas’ jaw slackened a little, the dark venom swirling in his eyes now replaced with a strange curiosity. He didn’t dare give them an inch for fear they would take the whole mile, but he’d done nothing but fight monsters and climb mountains since he got himself into this mess. No doubt there was a catch, some loophole that the Guardians of Light would exploit that he just wasn’t seeing, but... Well, it was just nice not to be immediately threatened for once.

That feeling swiftly passed as Lea and Roxas exchanged grins that were far too wide and excited to be indicative of anything good.

“Tell me, Vanitas,” Lea continued with a dark smile on his face. “Have you ever ‘Struggled’?”
Hayner placed his right hand on his hip and reached up and over his head with his left, squeezing his eyes shut as his obliques complained loudly, before relaxing and repeating the stretch with his other side.

He had been slouched over in the Usual Spot when he got the message, half-heartedly throwing darts at the worn dartboard and leaving tiny pinpricks in the wall around it. Pence and Olette were trying to make a dent in their summer project, but Hayner could tell their hearts weren’t really in it either: the two had barely finished a single page and kept stopping for ‘breaks’. More like stopping to raid the mini-fridge again. He wouldn’t be surprised if they were keeping the economy of Twilight Town afloat just in sales of sea salt ice cream alone, descending upon every supermarket in town whenever the dessert came back in stock only to clear them out again. It was even worse now that they had so many new friends to feed; an ice cream was less of a treat and more of a prized resource with several times the number of people now thieving from their hoard.

The days had just begun to blur together, which was pretty normal for the end of summer. There was only so much watermelon to eat and beaches to sit on before Hayner’s mind began to wander towards thoughts of adventure. He had tried to convince Roxas to start school with him so he would have someone else to pester, but the blond wasn’t exactly… willing. More specifically, he would rather “jump off the clock tower”, to use his own words. Hayner’s soul craved the sweet tranquillity of Twilight Town in the summer, but there was a part of his heart that had been awoken by the events that took place month prior.

More specifically, he was still on an adrenaline rush from trying to drop-kick Ansem. Man, that was cool.

The sweet DING that hit Hayner’s ears dragged him out of his bored stupor, fumbling with the dart he had in his right hand and almost dropping the sharp end into his leg. The pealing bell was a notification from Xion to signal a message sent through the Twilight Town group chat. Hayner would never have guessed that he would’ve ended up with so many friends, especially since most of Twilight Town had deemed him a rambunctious trouble-maker. It was crazy that they had found a new friend in Roxas – someone he had never met yet felt as if he had known for a lifetime – and the blond had brought so many new people with him. There was no shortage of friends to go on beach trips with, challenge to Struggles with, climb to the highest apex of the clock tower and feel the wind through his hair with. His life was so different since his new friends had walked into his life, and he would never find the words to describe how grateful he was.

Hayner smiled to himself and unlocked his cell phone. Neither Pence nor Olette had noticed the same notification on their own cell phones, both desperate to make at least some progress on their school project before it was too late. Hayner was content to cram the whole thing in on the last day, but the duo would actually murder him in an alley if he let them do that again. They were not interested in spending yet another sleepless night on the final day of summer. He just hoped that whatever message the black-haired girl had sent would be something to get him up and out of his chair before he became one with the couch.

number_imaginary: hey so sora’s brother is coming over later, wanna struggle?

Pence and Olette almost hit the roof as Hayner leapt out of his seat with a whoop. He grabbed his red plaid jacket from its usual spot on the floor and threw it over his shoulders in excitement. He hadn’t even asked Xion just how soon he needed to be ready, but he didn’t care! Hayner never needed an excuse to Struggle, and the thought of meeting yet another new friend was like music to his ears. He
had an extreme respect for Sora; the brunette had not only saved Twilight Town multiple times, but Hayner could only hope that he would match him in combat one day. He always seemed to fall just shy of beating the Struggle champion, especially now that Roxas and Lea were constantly embroiled in a competition for the top spot, but maybe he could show just how far his skills had come? He really wanted them to take him on their next adventure some time.

“Come on, guys!” he bellowed, grinning at Pence and Olette who had confused expressions on their faces. “Check your phones, we gotta go!”

Hayner grabbed his right foot behind his back and pulled upwards, feeling his adductor muscle stretch with a satisfying ache. Olette sat idly on a nearby bench in the sandlot, still nose-deep in her notes as the impending deadline for their assignment still plagued the back of her mind.

Pence thumbed through his cell phone, his fingers almost a blur with how quickly he was typing. He had always been more technologically-minded compared to his friends so was the most active on their group chat, and was attempted to pry more information from their evasive friends. Hayner may be content to spend a little extra time stretching while they waited for the others to arrive, but Pence’s analytic mind was already beginning to wander.

DogStreet4Life: yo guys were here!! how long u gonna be??
number_imaginary: were comin down now, vanitas took a little longer to show up than we thought he would
DogStreet4Life: hayner hasnt shut up about it since he got ur message lol!!
DogStreet4Life: hes v excited!!
notanobody: hmmmnnnnnnnnnnn
notanobody: we’ll see
DogStreet4Life: ?????
white_witch: dont mind roxas, its all going to be fine
DogStreet4Life: would it not be????
notanobody: we’ll see
SoHotImOnFire: its gonna be awesome im so PUMPED
DogStreet4Life: I bet ur excited mr reigning struggle champion!!
SoHotImOnFire: hell yeah, especially seeing as its gonna be against vanitas
SoHotImOnFire: this is gonna be great lmaooo

Pence could feel dark shadows of doubt peeking over the horizon. He had been stricken with suspicions right from the get-go considering that Sora had never once mentioned any siblings, so for his ‘brother’ to turn up out of the blue, especially seeing as Sora himself hadn’t visited Twilight Town in three months… It was confusing at best, and concerning at worst. Hayner was perhaps a little too ready to befriend everyone who crossed his path – something that he and Sora shared in common – and Pence was by no means upset about meeting a new friend to add to their pack, but something wasn’t sitting right with him.

Roxas had always been rather serious in his demeanour, and Pence wasn’t the most observant person in the world, but even he could tell that the blond was stewing in a pot of his own discomfort. But why? Why would he have such a negative reaction to Sora’s own blood? Just what were they hiding from him…?

“So, what do you think he’s going to be like?” Olette asked, finally setting down her notepad after scribbling out several lines and giving up. “Do you think he’ll be like Sora?”

“There it,” Hayner remarked, squatting down and extending one leg out to the side and stretching his hamstrings. “If he was then he would’ve been there when we kicked Ansem’s ass.”
“Yeah, maybe he’s more of a technophile?” Pence offered, tugging at his headband. “You know, like someone who works from behind the scenes?”

“You mean like you?” Olette teased, playfully punching him on the shoulder.

“N-No!” Pence defended. “Well, it would be nice to meet someone else who likes technology as much as I do…”

“Pence, no one likes technology as much as you!” Hayner grinned, rolling his shoulders in his sockets.

“Maybe he doesn’t like fighting at all,” Olette continued, tugging her orange socks up around her calves. “He might like more romantic stuff, like sewing or gardening…”

“You mean like you?” Pence pressed, using Olette’s words against her. He sniggered as she crossed her arms in mock anger.

“Nah, you guys are lame!” Hayner laughed, jogging on the spot and feeling his blood rush through his veins with his building adrenaline. “He’s Sora’s brother so he’s probably a kickass hero!”

“What, like YOU?” both Olette and Pence teased him in unison.

“Stop it, it’s creepy when you do that!”

Hayner was about to launch into another round of stretching when his brown eyes picked up movement from the entrance to the sandlot. He immediately broke out into a wide smile as the party made their way into the sandlot, Roxas and Lea engaged in an enthusiastic conversation while Xion and Naminé followed behind. Pence and Olette noticed the new arrivals at the same time and jumped to their feet, the notepad now forgotten on the bench as their attention was dragged away. Hayner jogged up to the group, eager to meet his new potential friend and get the party started! The Struggle Tournament might only take place once a year, but he was down for a match at literally any time of day!

“It’s about time!” he yelled with a grin on his face, waving at his friends. “I’m so ready to kick your butts!”

“You wish!” Lea retorted with his own grin. “But it’s not me you’ll be fighting this time. Guys… this is Vanitas.”

Hayner looked away from the taller redhead to finally meet his new friend. The scorching excitement that had claimed his heart suddenly ran cold and his smile wavered for just a moment, his brown eyes locked with sickly yellow orbs drenched in acidic disdain. Hayner had already built an image in his mind of what Sora’s brother would look like, but the boy in front of him completely obliterated all his preconceived notions. The crazy bird’s nest atop his head was identical in style but darker in colour, a deep black that only accentuated how pale and unearthly his skin was in comparison to Sora’s sun-kissed complexion. He could see the powerful muscles that lay beneath the black and red bodysuit, and the unwavering confidence in his stance radiated a powerful and dangerous aura.

But that wasn’t what Hayner’s mind was focusing on. It was those eyes. Those same yellow eyes that Ansem possessed. The sign of someone touched by darkness.

Hayner shuddered and shook his head. There was no way any of his friends would be walking side by side with someone associated with Ansem and his goons. He knew better than to judge someone by their appearance. There was no doubt in his mind that this boy was indeed Sora’s brother: those
gravity-defying spikes couldn’t have belonged to anyone else. He just had a very specific taste in fashion, and that was OK! Hayner’s wardrobe was at least 50% plaid, so he wasn’t one to talk.

“Hi Vanitas, nice to meet you!” he exclaimed, the grin on his face now back in full force and extending one hand out in a fist. “I’m Hayner, put her there!”

Vanitas looked at the clenched fist in confusion, wondering if the blond was planning on socking him in the face with it. When no such blow came, he gave a short nod and returned the fist bump.

“You’re the one who tried to jump-kick Ansem, right?” he asked with a grin of his own. “I can respect that, props to you.”

Hayner’s chocolate eyes widened in shock before his cheeks flushed rosy red with embarrassment, running his hand through his dirty blond curls. He had heard so many times about how he was too reckless, too thick-skulled, too gung-ho. Hearing someone finally congratulate him on his attempt to assist in the fight against Ansem when he had previously just stood to one side and let Sora, Donald and Goofy do all the work was equal parts refreshing and humbling.

“Aww, thanks man!” he chuckled coyly. “It’s no big deal.”

“Please don’t encourage him,” Olette interjected with her own soft smile. “If his head gets any bigger, he won’t fit through the door.”

“Hey, I wanted to ask,” Pence interjected with an excited twinkle in his eyes. “Do you have an interest in electronics by any chance?”

“Umm, no?” Vanitas responded confusedly. “I can just about turn my Gummiphone on, but that’s as good as it gets.”

“Aww man,” Pence groaned, disappointed that he’d once again missed out on making a friend who was as much of a technology freak as he was. Naminé pat him on the back reassuringly with a whispered “there, there.”

“So, what’s a ‘Struggle’ anyway, and why does it have such an ominous name?” Vanitas questioned hesitantly.

When Lea had first mentioned the word to him with that evil glint in his green eyes, the raven Keyblade wielder had genuinely considered running for the hills. Roxas was one of three people that he considered a real threat to his ongoing existence: the blond Nobody held a vicious grudge towards the guy who had tried to murder his Somebody several times, and who was standing in the way of Sora’s freedom. Vanitas wouldn’t put it past Roxas and Lea to lure him into a back alley and rip him limb from limb, and only the presence of Xion and Naminé gave him any reassurance that he would live to see the next sunrise.

“Oh man, I’m so excited!” Hayner exclaimed, fist pumping the air with unrestrained enthusiasm. “I love getting new people into Struggling! It’s a battle for only the strongest warriors, who clash in the arena to determine who is the most powerful in all the land!”

“You beat each other up until one of you wins,” Roxas stated, not paying Hayner’s emotional rant any mind, and handed Vanitas a leather pouch. It was packed to bursting point with small red orbs, blinking slowly with dim red lights like fireflies. He held one in the palm of his hand, feeling it trying to tug itself back towards the pouch with its brethren with the weak Magnet magic that was encapsulated inside. “You knock the orbs out of each other and whoever has the most after one minute, wins.”
“Well, it sounds a lot less cool when you say it like that,” Hayner huffed, accepting his own pouch straining at the seams with aqua blue orbs and a light-weight foam sword that he bounced from hand to hand. Roxas passed an identical weapon to Vanitas, who accepted and rolled it in his palm. It was like a child’s toy, the hilt made of yellow plastic and the blade formed from blue foam. It made him appreciate the heavy and comforting weight of the Void Gear.

“How do you expect me to use this?” he frowned, feeling belittled as if he was a child being handed their first wooden sword. Roxas’ blue eyes narrowed in a reflection of Vanitas’ own expression, his distrust leaking through to his features even as his voice remained restrained.

“Yes,” he insisted. “You’re not trying to hurt each other here. No Keyblades, no magic, and definitely no punching each other in the stomach! I heard you’ve done a lot of that.”

“What!” Vanitas protested as Roxas shoved a finger in his face like a scolding teacher. “But that’s my signature move!”

“Whatever man, let’s go!” Hayner exclaimed, hopping from foot to foot with explosive impatience. “Sora might’ve beaten me, but there’s no way I’m losing to you!”

Vanitas tutted at the bravado exuding from the dirty-blond as he squatted into a battle stance. Even though Hayner was taunting him, his face still beamed with a light-hearted and amused expression. Vanitas could feel his blood beginning to pump as his battle senses roared to life at the provocation. What a strange world, that kids would beat each other up for fun. Perhaps he could get behind this one. Roxas threw Hayner a smirk and two finger guns as he left the two to their brewing battle.

“I’ll buy you a watermelon if you beat him first try!” he laughed, unable to remain moody in the presence of one of his best friends. Hayner’s brown eyes widened at the ultimatum and tightened his grip on his sword.

“Now you’re talking!”

“Oi! I’m standing right here!” Vanitas protested as Roxas and Lea exchanged high fives. Olette snapped a photo of the two poised to begin their Struggle with an old-fashioned camera and fanned the Polaroid that was spat out of the device, rapidly developing the photo so it could be added to her scrapbook later. He growled and readied himself into his usual fighting stance, his right arm raised to shoulder height and sword reared back like a viper ready to strike. Hayner’s grip on his own sword was loose and relaxed, as if his fingers were barely brushing the yellow plastic hilt. It would be easy to disarm him, but just as easy for the dirty-blond to adapt his attack from any angle.

“Come on, give me all you got!” Hayner taunted, his sword bouncing in his grasp. Vanitas could feel the eyes of the Guardians of Light burning into the back of his skull, ready to pounce and tear his head off at the smallest sign that their friend was in danger against him. They were content to remain off stage and out of range of the two overly-eager combatants, but the black-haired Keyblade wielder could sense their tension from across the sandlot. He even caught sight of a straggler loitering out the corner of his eye, a boy wearing a long white trench coat and a black skull beanie who lingered around the edge of a nearby building and remained mostly out of sight, but who watched the pending Struggle with an intense stare.

“3… 2… 1… STRUGGLE!”

Hayner pushed against his heels and launched forward at Vanitas as the countdown reached its conclusion. He drew his foam sword back and stabbed at Vanitas with all his strength, aiming for the sweet spot between those yellow eyes. Vanitas saw the attack coming from a mile away and dodged the blow with little effort, ducking under Hayner’s arm and swiping across his legs with his own
sword. He smirked a little as he remembered Kairi using the exact same move against Riku during their fight, and it had the same effect of taking Hayner’s feet out from under him. As Hayner’s back smacked against the concrete with a dull thud a myriad of blue orbs scattered out of his pouch and across the sandlot, kicking up dust and dirt into the air. The Magnet magic trapped within the plastic casing zeroed in on Vanitas, the orbs jetted over to him and into his own pouch as soon as he got within spitting distance.

He supposed this was an early lead.

Hayner swore and jumped back up to his feet, swinging at Vanitas’ exposed back and refusing to allow him a moment to rest. His movements were sloppy and it was obvious he wasn’t a trained fighter, but he covered for his flaws with blistering speed and solid determination. Vanitas heard the wind break behind him and blocked Hayner’s blow before it could land, the soft foam of the twin swords bouncing off each other and almost tearing the toy weapons out of their wielder’s grasps.

“Come on Hayner, go get him!” Roxas cheered from the side lines, earning himself a thumbs up from Hayner and an acidic glower from Vanitas. The raven Keyblade wielder decided he was done playing defensively and took the moment of distraction to bop Hayner on the head. He didn’t put a fraction of his strength behind the strike, otherwise even the toy weapon would’ve given him a concussion, but Hayner wasn’t really deserving of his full power anyway. The dirty-blond winced and rubbed his head as a few stray orbs wiggled free of his pouch and found their home with Vanitas.

“30 seconds left!”

Hayner growled to himself – he figured Sora’s talent for combat would run in the family, but he could tell that Vanitas wasn’t taking him seriously. Time to change that. He dug the toes of his plaid sneakers into the dirt of the sandlot and spun around with all the force of a typhoon, socking Vanitas in the face before he had a chance to react. The shiny metal that protected his jaw absorbed almost all the force of the blow, but it was still enough to send crimson orbs flying across the ground. It seemed that it didn’t matter how hard he hit, simply landing a blow was enough for the orbs to loosen themselves.

Unfortunately, Hayner’s victory was also his downfall. He had put so much momentum into his attack that he immediately lost his balance and toppled to the ground face-first. No orbs shot from his pouch, seeing as he had technically landed the hit on himself, but it was too late anyway. Lea put two fingers in his mouth and let out a piercing whistle that brought the Struggle to a grinding halt.

“And, that’s Time!” Lea bellowed, his deep voice carrying above the cheering of his friends. “Vanitas wins!”

“Aww man, I didn’t stand a chance!” Hayner whined, rolling onto his back and throwing his arms out to the side. “I’m never gonna be the Struggle champ!”

Vanitas snorted and shook his head in amusement, extending a hand out to the downed blond and allowing him to use his weight to pull himself to his feet.

“That’s not like that, you won’t,” he smirked. “Maybe pick on someone who’s at your skill level. Like Naminé.”

Vanitas heard raucous laughter erupt from the spectators behind him as Hayner groaned and dropped his head in defeat. For once, the smile on Vanitas’ face felt genuine. Hayner couldn’t hold a candle to his own overwhelming strength and he would’ve been nothing more than a red smear on the ground of the sandlot if he had used his magic against him, but there was something about their
Struggle that was almost… fun? Maybe it was because he had spoken to him like an equal – even when their skills levels couldn’t even compare – or perhaps it was because the adrenaline that drove through their veins stemmed from mutual enjoyment. Vanitas was so familiar with fighting for his life against those who wished to wipe him and his Unversed off the face of the earth; it was a nice change to let his guard down and just have some fun.

Strange. ‘Fun’ wasn’t a concept he was really familiar with.

“Nice work, both of you!” Lea smiled, hopping up onto the stage and patting Hayner on the back reassuringly. “Neither of you tried to kill each other, I’m very proud! Now, you get to face the Struggle Champion!”

He hefted his own foam sword over his right shoulder and curled his left bicep, his sleeveless jacket allowing his muscles to bulge under his skin and his wild red mane glowing in the setting sun like a lion. For a moment, Vanitas swore he was looking at the statue of Hercules that towered above Thebes in a similar pose, one of victory and honour.

“Oh yeah? Who’s that?”

Lea’s face visibly dropped at Vanitas’ statement, offended at the notion that it could possibly be anyone else.

“Obviously me, you dolt!” he exclaimed, forcefully shoving his thumb into his chest. “Who else around here looks like they could be the undisputed, unbeaten, unrelenting champion?!”

“Roxas.”

“Ha ha!” Roxas jeered from the side lines, although it was all in good faith. Vanitas could hear quiet laughter coming from the deep recesses of his heart that only widened the grin on his own face. Lea pouted in an expression that seemed out of place on his angular features.

“Just shut up and fight me.”

“Aye aye,” Vanitas replied, readying himself for battle once more. He was still riding high off his easy victory against Hayner, but something was telling him to take Lea more seriously. The redhead was a Guardian of Light, plus he was the ‘assassin’ of Organization XIII, a title that commanded a lot of respect. The again, Lea had already made it clear that the goal wasn’t to strike each other down with any meaningful force, so if Lea was actively holding himself back then it should be an easy win!

… Right?

Lea and Vanitas both took up their battle stances as Hayner dejectedly carried himself out of the arena. Even though the redhead looked as calm as ever, his foam sword resting over one shoulder and a twinkle in his eye, Vanitas could sense a storm brewing beneath the surface. He wasn’t the Organization’s assassin for nothing, and he would be a fool to think he would allow the black-haired boy to walk all over him like he had done to Hayner. Lea had no intention of turning the sandlot into an actual warzone, but that didn’t mean he was going to let Vanitas off lightly.

“3… 2… 1… STRUGGLE!”

Vanitas immediately considered his first move. Hayner had charged into battle headfirst with no consideration for his opponent, and that had ultimately led to his defeat. Vanitas was not going to make that mistake, not against Lea. He didn’t particularly like allowing his opponent to have the first
move, but he wasn’t facing some rando kid off the street. A toy sword wasn’t going to stop Lea from kicking his ass, and he needed to be prepared. Vanitas lowered his stance in apprehension and prepared to defend himself against whatever Lea threw at him.

Neither Lea nor Vanitas moved.

“Hah!” Lea guffawed. “I’m flattered; you’re finally taking me seriously!”

Vanitas’ typical scowl found its way onto his features. His heart had urged him to jump into battle with teeth bared and claws out before Lea could retaliate, but his head had told him to stand his ground. Evidently Lea’s mind was telling him the same, which meant that he was taking Vanitas just as seriously. He snorted as he bent his legs, preparing to shoot forward and close the gap like he had done with Leon. The lack of sleeves on Lea’s jacket gave him a good view of the twitching muscles beneath his skin, and he noticed how his shoulders tensed with the action. Lea could pretend to be laid back, but he was just as ready to pull the trigger as Vanitas was.

Lea reflexively shifted the foam sword from his shoulder and brought it down to block Vanitas’ attack, only to slice through thin air. Rather than dart forward as he had indicated he would, the black-haired Keyblade wielder had called his bluff and instead whizzed around his side and was now poised to strike Lea’s back. He had seen that move many times before whenever Roxas fought the Nobodies. He called it ‘Reversal’. Lea couldn’t help but grin – looks like Vanitas was starting to learn the value of strategy over brute strength.

Vanitas swiped across Lea’s body with his sword but the redhead simply took a step forward with his long legs and the tip of the sword narrowly skimmed the hem of his jacket. He tried to backhand the former Nobody but Lea just continued to hop forward, leaving Vanitas wiping at the air with little success. He scoffed in irritation, but the excitement running through his veins kept him from falling into a rage. Lea dug one foot into the sand below his feet and spun on his axis, attempting to uppercut Vanitas with his weapon but finding the blade blocked by the one in Vanitas’ hand. He was delighted to see that the grin on his own face was mirrored on Vanitas, although his yellow eyes still sparked with a dark competitiveness.

Vanitas couldn’t recall the last time he had fought someone who made him feel equally matched.

“30 SECOND LEFT, KEEP AT IT!”

The upward thrust of Lea’s failed attack had caused it to ricochet off Vanitas’ own sword, staggering the two embroiled competitors backwards with recoil. He may not have landed a single hit yet, but it had created an opening, and that was all Vanitas needed. The two were on such a level playing field that the battle would end with neither side scoring a single point if he didn’t take the opportunity to steal the lead. His bloodlust rose within his veins as his heart forgot that the sword in his hand was less of a deadly weapon and more of a child’s toy. He laughed and darted forward, eyes glued to Lea’s torso like it was a bulls eye, and prepared himself to strike.

Vanitas squeezed his eyes shut against the surge of heat that threatened to scorch his skin as wild flames danced across his vision. The inferno tore through everything in its path but never once came close to licking his exposed flesh, although he could feel the moisture sucked out of his mouth and eyes as if the sun had exploded and was consuming everything in its wake. It was over before he knew it, tiny flecks of glowing ash raining through the air like blackened snow as he dared to open his eyes once more.

The insurmountable horde of Dusks was now pathetic piles of soot and dust, but Vanitas didn’t spare them a second thought. Instead he let out a gasp that ripped through his parched throat and
sprinted towards the prone figure in the middle of the desolate battlefield, hair almost as red as the fire that had swept across the passageway between worlds. The metal of his crown necklace felt as if it would brand the skin on his collar bones as he closed the distance, the Nobody’s black leather trench coat splayed across the ground like a pool of ink.

Vanitas dropped to one knee in front of Axel, reaching out to take the fallen Nobody in his arms, but hesitated: his heart still ached with the memories of the assassin raising his chakrams and trying to strike him down in the name of Organization XIII. Even as he watched, Axel’s form was dissolving into the same miasma of soot and ash that still filled the air and clung to his own jet-black hair.

“You’re… fading away?” he croaked, feeling the lump in his throat swell as grief continued to grip his heart from someplace far away but also so close that he could feel it pounding in his chest. Axel only laughed in response, his expression one of peace rather than pain.

“Well, that’s what happens when you put your whole being into an attack. You know what I mean?”

Vanitas knew exactly what he meant. He had done the exact same many times before, and would doubtless do it again. Axel gave him a look of relief, as if the weight of his existence had been lifted from his shoulders at his impending death. Vanitas couldn’t bring himself to meet his gaze.


Vanitas flinched at the expression of remorse from the fallen Nobody, his form becoming less defined as more dark smoke leached from his figure and dissipated into the void around them. Not a single member of Organization XIII had ever expressed anything less than contempt for both himself and the world that told them they had no right to exist. How could he just lie there and accept his fate, ready to vanish into nothingness until even his name was lost to the passage of time. Didn’t he remember their promise? To reunite with Xion, find their hearts and escape the clutches of the Organization together Axel hadn’t promised him anything.

“When we find her, you can tell her that yourself,” Vanitas pressed, clenching his fists in determination.

Axel gave him a wide grin, one that didn’t flicker in its light even as his image started to lose coherence and his red hair and green eyes faded to grey. It was that same damned grin he had thrown the first time they had sat together atop the clock tower, the wind in their hair and sea salt ice cream in each hand Axel had never smiled at him like that.

“Think I’ll pass,” he smiled, his emerald eyes facing up to the endless void that eddied above their heads. “My heart just wouldn’t be in it, you know? Haven’t got one.”

He laughed at his own joke, but he was the only one. Vanitas Sora could feel every cell in his body, every flash of light in his heart screaming to do something, to hold onto him and never let him go. To drag him back to the Realm of Light kicking and screaming instead of just leaving him to die.

“What were you trying to do?”
Axel’s smile faded for a moment, betraying the feeling of guilt that still burned below the surface like his own flames. At any other time the warmth of his fire would have been comforting, would’ve stoked memories of the warm touch of someone who loved him. Now that he was facing his own death, the flames felt as cold as the emptiness in his chest.

“I… wanted to see Roxas,” he admitted, both to Sora and to himself. “He was the only one I liked. He made me feel… like I had a heart.”

Axel couldn’t recall if those words had ever left his lips before, but somehow the moment seemed right. He knew that Roxas was long gone, now just another cog in the machine that was Sora’s heart, but he couldn’t help but pray that even the tiniest part of his friend still lived on and could hear his words. He turned his head back to Sora. The Axel that had attempted to slam the spikes of his chakrams into Sora’s neck would’ve rejoiced at witnessing such a forlorn expression on the brunette’s face, but now it only hurt. More than he could ever put into words.

“It’s kind of funny. You make me feel the same way.”

Axel’s face turned once more to a genuine smile, the first he had worn since Roxas was torn from his grasp, and finally faded into dust. And as the rivulets of dust and smoked curled up into the air, Vanitas Sora Xion Roxas screamed and screamed.

For a moment, Vanitas felt as if he was in vacuum. No matter how hard he sucked his chest in, no air would fill his lungs. His fingertips tingled and his head swam until he could no longer tell which direction was up. He dug his palms into his eyes hard enough to leave bright flecks of light shooting across his vision. Somehow the pain was comforting, reassuring. It reminded him that he was alive, that he had a physical form and wasn’t just a drop in the ocean of the hundreds of hearts that wailed inside his chest and drowned out his own thoughts.

“Lea wins, nice going!”

Vanitas removed his hands from his face, allowing deep magenta and orange light to reach his eyes from the setting sun that now barely peeked over the skyline as night began to sweep over Twilight Town. He had no idea how he came to be lying flat on his back as red orbs twinkled around him like stars, but the aching in his back and head spoke a thousand words. He took a deep breath and felt the ground pushing up underneath his back as if it was supporting him when he was too weak to do so himself. The cool night air ran its fingers through his jet-black hair and the sand stung his eyes. It was like he was experiencing life for the first time, just as he had once done when he was torn out of Ventus’ heart by Xehanort. He didn’t remember the sensation of existence being so overwhelming before.

“Hey man, I didn’t hit you that hard, did I?”

Vanitas felt Lea step towards him and cast his shadow over his prone form, holding out one hand expectantly. He pushed himself up with his forearms and accepted the offer, tugging against Lea’s weight and pulling himself to his feet. His knees felt like they would buckle under his weight as if the air itself was dragging him down. He huffed and brushed his bodysuit off, scattering pale specks of dust into the wind.

“You wish. I guess I just… forgot where I was for a moment.”

Lea raised a single eyebrow in suspicion but chose not to push the subject. He was fortunate enough to have been spared from the clashes with Vanitas when he was aligned with the Seekers of
Darkness, but he could tell that the boy in front of him was a different person than when they had first met in Radiant Garden. That boy would never have accepted a hand to pull himself up with, would never have hesitated against him in battle. When his yellow eyes had widened in shock and he froze in place for seemingly no reason, Lea struck back for fear that the black-haired Keyblade wielder was about to unleash an attack that would actually harm him or those around them. Now he just felt bad.

“Well, looks like Lea keeps his title!” Naminé applauded as Roxas and Xion sprinted over and exchanged high fives with the redhead. “At least, until Roxas takes it back next week.”

“Too right!” Roxas replied enthusiastically. “You had better keep that title for me! It wouldn’t be right to lose it to anyone else!”

Vanitas wasn’t sure if he should be insulted by that statement. He decided to be insulted by that statement.

“You know, ever since you guys showed up I’ve never stood a chance at the championship,” Hayner moaned, the smile on his face proof that he didn’t mean his words. “This is so not fair!”

“Technically, you were never champion anyway,” Pence interjected. “That was always Setzer—“

“Hey, don’t show me up in front of my new friend!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Vanitas smiled for a moment, but it slipped from his face after only a second. What a strange notion, that friends would hurl insults around so casually. Their laughter filled the air and each person wore a warm smile, but surely they should be at arms against each other? Maybe he wasn’t understanding the finer points of their relationship, but they must have an enormous understanding to be that comfortable in their presence.

“So, you guys are gonna take Vanitas to the mansion next, right?” Lea asked, crossing his arms and putting his weight on one leg. “You better get going before night falls. The underground is hard enough to navigate while you can still the signposts, never mind when it gets dark.”

“You’re not coming?” Vanitas questioned him. After Lea… or more specifically Axel had sacrificed himself to get Vanitas, Donald, and Goofy across the border between worlds so they could storm the World That Never Was, he had always regretted missing the opportunity to get to know the former Nobody a little better. The redhead had plucked him from the jaws of the beast when Xehanort had attempted to subdue his heart and turn him into yet another of his clones, and had he been a second later then Vanitas would be slaving away under the old man’s thumb by now…

Wait, didn’t he end up doing that anyway? Was he just remembering it wrong?

“Nah, not this time,” Lea stated, running one hand through his crimson hair. The spikes just bounced back into position against the force of gravity. “I’m trying to blackmail Isa into taking up Frisbee Golf with me again. Besides, Ienzo needs all the hands he can get with his current… ‘project’.”

Vanitas winced at Lea’s avoidant tone, but he was undeniably correct. He knew how important it was to keep the truth of their mission under wraps, but it was starting to weigh heavily on his heart. Dodging questions about the whereabouts of Sora and his relation to him was becoming tiring. And what on earth is Frisbee Golf?!

“That’s alright, we’ll come instead!” Hayner insisted, flexing one arm to show his muscles and
beaming like the sun. Olette responded by grabbing his ear between her fingers and dragging him backwards off the sandlot.

“Not a chance!” she demanded as Hayner’s protested loudly about his manhandling. “We still need to finish that project by the end of the week!”

Pence shook his head and followed after his retreating friends, but not before snapping a Polaroid to add to his blackmail collection. Lea placed one hand on Roxas’ shoulder, feeling the tense muscles underneath relax at the touch of a friend, and bent down to whisper in his ear.

“You know, if you’re wanting to mess with Vanitas, just think of what Sora would do.”

Roxas gave Lea a confused look, noting the playful light in the redhead’s green eyes.

“What do you mean?” he whispered back, trying not to alert Vanitas to their scheming. “Sora would probably just relentlessly try and befriend him until he couldn’t say no…”

A moment of understanding passed between the two as Roxas finally picked up on Lea’s words. The blond glanced at Xion and they exchanged a conniving smile as Lea left the group, satisfied with his work. He had been concerned about leaving his best friends alone with a dangerous member of the Seekers of Darkness, but Vanitas was practically a different person compared to their first meeting. He had spat and struck out at anyone who drew too near like a frightened animal, yet had accepted Hayner’s hand without question and had shown restraint in a battle that was for fun and not for bloodshed. Lea still wasn’t sure he was redeemable, but he wondered if Vanitas was starting to become more than just half of Ventus. He wondered if Vanitas had even noticed the change himself.

“Hey, Vanitas,” Roxas said happily, throwing one arm over the raven boy’s shoulder in companionship. “Good going out there, I believed in you all the way.”

“Yeah, me too!” Xion agreed, bumping him on the shoulder playfully. “Let’s get going, friend, we still have a lot to do today!”

Vanitas looked at them like they had lost their minds. Roxas swallowed a giggling fit at the horrified look on his face at their sudden shift in demeanour. Lea was right, this was absolutely hilarious and way funnier than just poking fun at him.

“Get your filthy hands off of me,” Vanitas spat, trying to wiggle out of Roxas’ grip as he led him towards the underground pathways. “You’re being a creep, what the hell has come over you. Hey, Naminé! Don’t just watch, come and help me!”

Naminé decided to just watch and not help him. She giggled lightly and followed behind as Vanitas continued his loud complaining and Roxas continued to talk at length about how they were ‘best friends now’. Xion even chimed in about ‘making friendship bracelets together’. Part of her wanted to save Vanitas from the torture he was being forced to endure. The other part of her wanted to watch him descend into madness.

Naminé had been worried that her plan wasn’t going to work. Now that she could see how Vanitas had changed, perhaps everything was going to turn out alright.

There was a time when the only emotion Roxas felt towards Sora was undeniable, unquenchable hatred.
It began from the first moment Roxas had heard his Somebody’s name. He and Xemnas had stood on that godforsaken beach in the Realm of Darkness, charcoal sand crunching beneath their boots and inky black waves lapping around their ankles. They spoke for a long time, although Roxas couldn’t remember what they spoke about. He had just been born, staggering around the forest surrounding Twilight Town without a name or any memories to call his own. Lea had jokingly called him a ‘zombie’, which was a comparison that only seemed more apt as time marched on. Roxas was a literal walking dead man, no heartbeat within his empty chest as the heart that birthed him continued to live on within his Somebody.

To think that a Nobody could maintain a stable existence while their Somebody still lived. If Sora hadn’t spent that entire year in a coma, who knows how long Roxas would’ve gone without a personality or drive.

The only thing the blond remembered about his meeting with Xemnas was the ending – Xemnas has given Roxas a predatory look, like a lion eyeing up his prey, his yellow eyes glowing like stars in the endless void that surrounded them. If Roxas could’ve felt fear he would’ve been frozen in place, but instead Xemnas had given him a mournful smile and whispered a name in his ear.

“Sora.”

Roxas became very much acquainted with that name. Sora was his Somebody, the boy who had sacrificed his heart to save a friend but had then stolen it right back. He owed a great debt to whatever deity had allowed him to continue existing, and that debt was being paid for by Roxas. The more he learned about the brunette, the more he grew to despise the boy he had never met yet owed his entire existence to. Sora got to have a life, got to have a heart and emotions and memories. He got to see the worlds in all their beauty while Roxas was resigned to the shadows. He got to stand in the light while Roxas was burned alive. Nobodies weren’t supposed to have feelings, but Roxas felt it. He felt it more than he would ever be ready for.

DiZ’s equipment was still standing to attention just as he had left it, ready to be coaxed back to life by whoever was brave enough to lay their fingertips on the dusty keyboards and smudged screens. The laboratory cradled beneath the corpse of the abandoned mansion now existed in a memory, layers of grime on every surface as if the air itself was void of life and was sucking Roxas dry. If he blinked he could see himself smashing the computer to rubble, sparks flying through the air and tears running down his cheeks, but the memory vanished as soon as it appeared. The computer had once been his prison, and also his sanctuary. Seeing everything as it was left was bringing back a lot of feelings that were better left buried.

It had been a very long time since Roxas had beheld Sora with such malice. When he discovered his true nature, that he was destined to merge with his Somebody and vanish from existence with no one to remember his name or the impact he left behind, he was almost overcome with bloodlust. It was just so unfair. He was just as deserving of life as his brother, he didn’t care that he wasn’t supposed to exist. He did, and that had to mean something. But seeing the brunette floating within the white lotus pod, eyes shut in troubled sleep and clothes far too small for his frame, Roxas couldn’t remember what hatred even felt like. Neither he nor Sora had asked for any of this. It was just as unfair to hold him responsible. He had hoped the brunette would fill the black hole in his chest that grew larger every day until it threatened to swallow him entirely until only darkness remained behind.

Well, Sora had done a pretty good job of that.

“What even is all this stuff?” Vanitas mused. His usual grating voice came out as a whisper, as if speaking too loudly would somehow break the fragile machinery. The laboratory was like a
graveyard, so eerily still that even their gentle footsteps felt like earthquakes.

“This is DiZ’s stuff,” Roxas replied with a faraway expression on his face. “This is where they kept me while Sora was asleep. You can still see someone of his data left here.”

He pointed to one of the few functioning monitors. Sure enough, the silhouette of a boy remained illuminated on the screen, surrounded by waterfalls of information that cascaded down the screen before Vanitas could decipher them. Body temperature, oxygen saturation, heart rate. If he didn’t know any better, he would’ve sworn he was looking at readings from someone on life support. Perhaps the analogy wasn’t that far from the truth.

“This place is so creepy…” Xion shivered. She was thankful to have been spared from this era of Sora’s life, having already fallen into a deep slumber within his heart as Naminé pieced together his memories from the few fragments that were left behind. She carried the heavy weight of Sora’s identity within her own… ‘heart’? Whatever it was she had? But without the remaining pieces from Roxas she had merely slept alongside him. She still wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than the alternative.

“A lot of shady stuff went down here,” Naminé agreed, running her palm across the computer’s keyboard and feeling each key depressing beneath her skin. “Some of it was done by Riku. A lot of it was done by me.”

Roxas threw her a sorrowful look and rubbed her shoulder in solidarity. This was an unpleasant place for the both of them, for mostly the same reasons. It was where Roxas had come to die, and it was where Naminé had led him to die. Where she had desperately tried to cover the alabaster white walls of her room with colourful drawings to stave off the madness, and where Roxas had almost lost his identity to someone so powerful that his faint light was completely eclipsed.

“I keep being dragged to all these backwater dumps, fuck my life.”

Vanitas had no respect for the sanctity of the place. As far as he was concerned, he was in a musty old mansion with musty old computers surrounded by musty old people. He wouldn’t admit that his bravado was a front to conceal his discomfort. The artificial blue lighting, the flecks of dust scattered through the air, the stale smell in his nostrils. Vanitas had been to some awful places in his life – hell, he had just come back from goddamn Halloween Town - but there was something about this place that was so much more frightening. The Realm of Darkness was practically a vacation spot compared to this.

“So, Naminé,” Xion interjected, wrapping her hands around her exposed arms and shivering slightly. “You were the one who suggested this place. What do you have in mind?”

Naminé nodded silently and pointed the group towards an open doorway that led deeper into the bowels of the laboratory. Roxas’ nose curled up in response – the path that lay beyond that threshold led towards the pods. The place where Sora had slept for a year while his fractured memories were sewn back together, and where Roxas had met the end of his journey. It was also where he had fought Axel for the last time, where the redhead had decided that Roxas would be returning to the World That Never Was even if he had to chop off a few limbs to do so.

Vanitas had never seen the pod before, but his heart ached like he had lived a thousand lives within its cavern. The white lotus was many times taller than he was, the petals overlapping like delicate porcelain but shiny as if the metal had been spared from the decay that encroached on the rest of the mansion. The lights had long since gone out so Vanitas used his Gummiphone to illuminate the flower, casting dark shadows against the walls that reminded him of the Heartless that once waited for him to wake up so they could steal his heart away.
“Don’t touch it,” Roxas insisted. “Who knows if it’s still active.”

Vanitas locked eyes with the blond with an intense stare and placed one hand on the pod in defiance. Roxas sighed.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“I mean, you brought me here to put me inside this thing, right?” Vanitas insisted, expecting to feel a throbbing pulse from the metal but only receiving an icy chill in response. “It would be awfully convenient…”

“Good lord, no!” Naminé exclaimed in shock. “We’re just going to try something a little different!”

Naminé hadn’t considered just how shady her plan looked to someone observing it from the outside. Her power over Sora’s memories wasn’t intrinsically tied to the pod or even the mansion, but she was hopeful that it would give her the boost she needed to untangle the web in his heart. Perhaps Sora would be more receptive to her touch here, and perhaps the familiar surroundings would strengthen her own resolve.

“You know I have some power over Sora’s memories,” she explained as Vanitas narrowed his yellow eyes in suspicion. “Ienzo has already mentioned that he’s concerned your hearts may become tangled together – that’s why we’re trying to strength Sora’s heart. I wanted to try using my powers to help separate the two of you a little, maybe to buy us some time.”

“Wait, I remember something about that!” Xion agreed, casting the light from her own Gummiphone onto Vanitas’ face and almost blinding him in the process. “When us and Kairi were in Traverse Town, you were trying to recall the promise you had made to her but you kept remembering yourself in Sora’s place. Is that what this is about?”

“Wait, what?!” Roxas yelled in response, inadvertently blinding Xion with his own light. “Why does nobody tell me about these things?!”

“Will the two of you put those down already, someone is gonna go blind!” Vanitas yelled back. Both Roxas and Xion turned their attention back to him, accidentally shining both lights in his face. Vanitas swore loudly.

“Guys, that’s why I brought the two of you with us!” Naminé hurriedly explained, anxiety building in her chest that Vanitas was about to sock one of them in the face. “You’ve been in the exact same situation, both of you have had Sora’s memories filter into your hearts and get muddled in with your own identities. If anyone can sympathise with Vanitas, I was hoping it would be you!”

Roxas and Xion exchanged guilty looks and stood down. There was an uncomfortable truth behind her words, a reminder that at one point, Sora’s overwhelming light had almost swallowed them up. Naminé sighed and sat down on the floor, crossing her legs and placing her palms on her knees. She gestured for Vanitas to reciprocate and he did so, but not without grumbling about getting dirt on his clothes. An eerie silence befell the chamber as the blonde took several deep breaths to calm her nerves. With the piercing lights shining from the Gummiphones and the two sitting in silence, Vanitas felt as if he was at a séance. They did know Sora wasn’t technically dead, right?

“Alright, let’s start with something easy,” Naminé explained, her eyes closed softly as if she was on the verge of sleep. “Sora, do you recall the first time we met in person?”

Sora rubbed his nose in thought. The memories of his time in Castle Oblivion were never quite put back together and still hovered out of reach of his fingertips, but he was sure he could push just that
little bit harder and close the gap. Maybe this was just the first stepping stone to reopening the connection between himself and Naminé, granting her access to the deeper recesses of his heart. He didn’t like the thought of anyone poking around in there, but he trusted Naminé with everything he had.

“It may have started with a lie, but I’m really glad I met you, Sora.”

Sora’s chest ached at Naminé’s words, as if every syllable carved a little deeper into his heart until he could barely breathe. He removed his palm from the white petals of the pod and turned to her. She refused to make eye contact with him out of embarrassment of her bold statement, her arms clasped around each other as if holding on for dear life. Sora knew that the memories he shared with her were all fake, implanted into his brain to lead him astray and away from the people who still needed him. It didn’t matter that he knew the truth – the thoughts of the two sitting on the warm sand of Destiny Islands together, eating sea salt ice cream and building a raft to escape the doldrum of their intertwined lives still burned with a fire that refused to be extinguished.

“Yeah, he agreed quietly, swallowing the lump in his throat. “Me too.”

Naminé sapphire blue eyes snapped up from the floor and locked with his own, an expression of confusion and disbelief on her features. God, she looked so much like someone else, someone who’s heart was inexplicably tied to his own yet who had no face or name in his mind. Someone that she had been forced to take the place of. Sora wondered if anyone had ever spoken to Naminé like an actual person before, instead of just a tool to be used and then thrown aside when it had outlived its purpose.

“When I found you, even when I remembered your name… I was so, so happy,” Sora continued, a smile creeping onto his face even as his voice cracked with restrained sorrow. “The way I felt was no lie.”

Naminé felt Sora’s Vanitas’ infectious grin spread across her own face, his golden eyes glowing like the sun and black hair shining like ebony under the harsh laboratory lights. There was a very real possibility that his memories would never be restored, or that he may never awaken from his coma, but Sora Vanitas continued to grin even in the face of his own demise. She prayed she could have just a sliver of his determination, his faith, his purity. If she had a heart to call her own, she was sure it would be breaking.

“Goodbye,” she whispered, as if she was watching his casket disappear into the ground. Sora’s Vanitas’ smile dropped at her words yet the light burning in his eyes never dulled.

“No, not goodbye!” he insisted loudly, making Naminé jump in her own skin. “I’ll find you again after I wake up and we’ll be friend for real!”

Vanitas held out one hand and extended his pinky finger towards her. Naminé looked at it with disbelief. After everything she had done to him, all the memories she had stolen and all the joy she had sucked from his life, how could he so easily offer friendship and forgiveness? How could he stand in front of her, as pathetic and powerless as she was, and see someone worthy of redemption?

“Promise me, Naminé.”

“Hmm… OK, that’s not the start I was hoping for, but I guess it’s something. Sora, if we’re going to
have any chance of prying the two of your hearts apart, we need to find a memory that Vanitas isn’t a part of. Try and remember something from after you defeated him.”

Sora opened his mouth to protest, but closed it without speaking a word. Naminé hadn’t moved from her spot, so unnaturally still that he would’ve sworn she was a statue if she hadn’t just filled the air with her voice. Roxas just shrugged at him. He leaned back a little, turning his head towards the ceiling in concentration. Something from after Vanitas had been defeated… well, there was one memory that immediately jumped to mind, one memory that continued to stick with him as the sun rose and fell and the days passed by.

*Sora was humbled. His failure to achieve the rank of Keyblade Master had never weighed too heavily on his shoulders, and sometimes it even felt as if the people around him were more outraged by the decision than he was. The brunet didn’t need a title to prove his prowess, he demonstrated it with his actions and his words. He felt it in the smiles of everyone he met and the warmth of their hearts. There was so much more to life than striving for a few words to put before his name.*

*At that very moment, standing in front of the two greatest Keyblade Masters who ever lived, Sora finally understood why the title meant so much.*

*Xehanort and Eraqus exchanged tired smiles, the years of fighting now hitting them all at once. The prospect of peace seemed like nothing more than a fairy tale, a dream of a child who was yet to be touched by a world that wouldn’t spare a thought for the impact they would leave behind. Sora was still expecting something to jump out at him, some sneak attack that would wipe them out before he had a chance to blink. His heart didn’t know how to relax anymore. It wouldn’t accept that it was finally over.*

*Xehanort shuffled up to him with one hand behind his back, χ-blade still in hand. Sora Vanitas clenched his fist at the approach, the old man now within range to pierce the blade through his heart and bring his journey to a close before his time. He heard Mickey tense behind him, but it seemed like Xehanort had suddenly aged before his eyes. He no longer held himself with the arrogance and bravado that he once did, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders at the sight of his old friend. It was the first time Xehanort had ever truly appeared human.*

“They very well done.”

*Xehanort held the χ-blade out to Sora Vanitas, the emerald light constituting its blade shimmering and undulating beneath the crystal surface as if the weapon was alive. Identical pairs of yellow eyes met as Vanitas was overwhelmed with disbelief. Xehanort was just… handing it to him? After all these years, all the plotting and scheming, all the lives lost and worlds destroyed… had he finally admitted defeat? He accepted the χ-blade into his hands, the thick golden hilt filling his palm and threatening to drag him to the ground with its immense weight. It was like holding something that didn’t fit within the rules of the universe, something that was both an affront to nature and the culmination of its design all in one.*

*Vanitas remembered something, some words that had remained at the back of his mind without a name or face to attribute them to. A Keyblade wielder was born when they were bequeathed by another, when they touched someone else’s Keyblade and the magic that rushed within was imprinted on their soul. Riku had been bequeathed by Terra, and Kairi had been bequeathed by Aqua. Vanitas Sora couldn’t remember having ever been bequeathed by anyone; the Kingdom*
Key just appeared in his hand when his heart screamed for help as the Heartless descended upon the Destiny Islands, and when Riku had demonstrated that the darkness in his heart was out of control.

Was this moment, where Xehanort had willingly handed him the $\chi$-blade, the moment that he was truly bequeathed?

“Huh… it’s an interesting thought that’s worth revisiting, but not what we’re looking for today. I was sure that would work…”

Sora groaned and put his head in his hands, a sudden wave of intense nausea sweeping over him and threatened to drown him. The constant barrage of memories was starting to get to his head, and the flickering back and forth between his usual brown spikes and the jet-black bird’s nest was only sinking him deeper into his confusion. Surely it was Vanitas who was granted the $\chi$-blade and not him… right? It couldn’t have been him: he was slain in the Keyblade Graveyard by Vanitas and Ventus.

… Right?

“I guess we can go in the complete opposite direction,” Naminé mused, her eyes still closed and lost to the world around her. “Try to think of an important memory as far back as you can, before you even met Vanitas. There has to be a point where your memories separate, we just need to find it.”

Sora’s head was swimming, but he had to try. His friends had gone through so much to bring him to the point he was at, he couldn’t just throw in the towel now. Sure, he had lots of memories from before he and Vanitas had crossed paths in the cathedral in La Cité des Cloches, he had so many to choose from. He just had to pick whatever resonated with his heart the most. The moment where his heart was at its most determined, his faith at its strongest, the moment that best reflected who he was.

“It won’t work, the Keyhole’s not finished yet!”

Vanitas groaned and lowered the Keyblade of Heart. He knew that Goofy was right, but he was desperate to prove his own doubts wrong. Hollow Bastion’s Keyhole was now a perversion of the Door to Darkness, with so many artificial machines wired up to it that it no longer beat with its own heart. Ansem had turned it into a replica of the path to Kingdom Hearts, a path that would only open with all seven of the Princesses of Heart.

“What do we do?” he asked, more to himself than to Donald or Goofy.

“Maybe we gotta go wake Kairi up?”

Vanitas’ eyes reluctantly rested on the sleeping form of Kairi that remained on the floor in front of the Keyhole. Only the gentle rising and falling of her chest reminded him that she was still alive, so unnaturally still that she seemed like an illusion. After all the worlds the raven Keyblade wielder had dragged himself and his friends through, he wasn’t completely convinced that she wouldn’t just fade away like an apparition. She was one of the Princesses of Heart, but more importantly she was Vanitas’ best friend. The vicious claws of fate would never take that away from him.

If Kairi’s heart was needed to unlock the Keyhole, and Kairi’s heart was currently slumbering inside of his, then how to get it out?
“A Keyblade that unlocks other people’s hearts,” Vanitas mused, the Keyblade of Heart thrumming in his hand as its name was called. “I wonder…”

He ignored Donald and Goofy’s confused questioning and walked down the stairs towards Kairi’s body. He could feel the Keyblade vibrating in his hand as if it was sensing his intentions and was growing bloodthirsty. Vanitas Sora knew what he had to do, but his hands were shaking as he came to rest in front of the redhead, seeing her eyes closed in gentle sleep and a calm expression on her face as a storm raged around her. He had been through so much to find her. Fought so many Heartless, saved so many worlds, endured pain again and again in her name. It all seemed so distant now. He had to make it matter. After all, no one else would do it for him.

“Sora, hold on!”

“No, wait!”

It would be OK, it would only hurt for a moment. Sora wasn’t afraid to die. He smiled and plunged the sharp teeth of the Keyblade of Heart into his chest.

Vanitas gasped as if all the air had been sucked from his lungs, like he was drowning on dry land. His legs couldn’t hold him upright anymore and he collapsed to his knees as the world spun around him. His black trench coat burned against his skin as the evening sun bore down on him, scorching his flesh until he was sure he would burst into flames. Burning alive would probably hurt less than what he was feeling at that moment. At least it would be over quicker.

Roxas staggered towards him with a hand pressed to his forehead in pain, his blue eyes flickering with waves of confusion and recognition. Vanitas seemed to waver in front of him, shifting between that head of black hair and yellow eyes that he knew so well, and a pale mannequin with no name and a blank face lacking any features that would make it human. He was a friend, but then he was a stranger, a girl and then a boy and then nothing at all.

“Who… are you… again?” he asked, desperate for the person before him to explain itself before his head exploded. “I feel like I’m forgetting something important.”

Vanitas smiled to himself. He had already come to terms with the consequences of his actions, that returning his stolen memories to Sora would cause him to fade from the minds of anyone who had stood in his presence as if he had never existed. He just didn’t expect it to hurt so much. Xemnas always said that Nobodies didn’t have hearts, that any emotion they claimed to feel was merely an echo of a memory that had once gripped their hearts while they had one. Then again, Vanitas wasn’t technically anybody’s Nobody. If he had a heart it would be screaming to the heavens for help, something to take away the pain.

“You’ll be better off now, Roxas,” he insisted. Vanitas tipped forward and almost met the earth if it hadn’t been for Roxas catching him in his arms. Typical. Even as his memories were torn from him, he still reached out to help someone that he no longer remembered. He really was Sora’s Nobody.

Vanitas’ Replica body wasn’t able to maintain its form after suffering its fatal blow and began to disintegrate, flaking away into sparks of light that danced off into the sunset like fireflies. He was so weak that Roxas’ grip felt as if it would crush his bones beneath his skin with the smallest movement. The blond gazed down in horror as the person in his arms seemed to become more
transparent, the rapid flickering between a face he knew and a face he didn’t seeing as it was slowly replaced with nothingness.

“Am I the one who did this to you?” he pleaded. Vanitas shook his head, the tiny movement taking every ounce of strength he had left in his body.

“No,” he insisted. “This was my choice, to go away now.”

Xion Vanitas raised a hand to Roxas’ face and rested it against his cheek. His form was so unstable that he couldn’t feel the skin beneath his fingertips anymore. He was at peace with his fate, but even though he knew Roxas would forget their time together and his name would be lost to the annals of time, eclipsed by Sora’s light that outshone everything in its path, he would never allow his best friend to feel guilt at what he had done. Roxas may have raised his Keyblade against him, but it was Xion Vanitas that had forced his hand.

It would be OK, it would only hurt for a moment. Xion wasn’t afraid to die.

“I belong with Sora.”

“Alright, I think that’s enough. We’ve pushed too deep, time to bring you back out.”

Vanitas despised the look in Master Eraqus’ eyes.

It was a look of pity, a look that claimed to understand his emotions even though he had never stood in his shoes. The Master’s Defender was pointed towards him like a sabre, a master using his own weapon on his apprentice. He could still remember dangling his legs over the edge of the training grounds, teasing with the endless void that lay below the Land of Departure and laughing with Terra and Aqua without a care in the world. Now Terra’s heart was caught in the web of darkness that Master Xehanort had woven around it, and Aqua had thrown aside her morals as Keyblade Master to chase him down. What happened to them? How had their carefree lifestyle come crumbling down around them? And why were those happy memories becoming harder and harder to recall?

“The χ-blade has no place in this or any other world,” Master Eraqus growled, a fierce resolve burning in his brown eyes. “Xehanort has made his purpose clear… and I am left with no other choice.”

Vanitas opened his mouth to protest, but no words would come out. He wanted to demand an explanation from his teacher but he was afraid of the answer. No… he already knew the answer. Master Xehanort would stop at nothing until he was under his thumb, until he had formed the χ-blade with Vanitas’ brother and brought about the end of the world. He was useless without his friends by his side and they had abandoned him. He wasn’t strong enough to be a Keyblade Master and perhaps he never would be. Now he would never have a chance to be.

“Please… forgive me.”

Master Eraqus wasn’t able to meet Vanitas’ gaze as he shot a myriad of golden chains from the tip of the Master’s Defender and towards his heart. Vanitas knew that his decision was correct, that the only guaranteed way to protect Aqua and Terra from Master Xehanort’s poison was to remove him from the equation altogether. He didn’t resent his teacher for his decision, but his
heart pounded with fear stronger than he had ever felt in his life. He squeezed his eyes shut and braced his body for the incoming attack, ready to plunge into his chest and seal his heart away so it would never again touch the light of another.

Part of his heart knew that he didn’t have it in him to become a Keyblade Master. He didn’t have the same strength that Terra and Aqua did, the same resolve or faith that they did. Ventus Vanitas had resigned himself to that fact long ago, but he could still dream, right? Now he would never have the chance to try, so his last thoughts should be of his friends. Of the three of them riding through the void between worlds on their Gliders, Keyblades in hand and ready to defend the peace of the cosmos and anything that lay beyond. The trio would be unstoppable. Just them, together forever.

It would be OK, it would only hurt for a moment. Ventus wasn’t afraid to die.

“Come on Sora, you have to come back to us! Don’t leave us like this again!”

Vanitas wasn’t capable of feeling hate. He wasn’t capable of feeling anything. He was a Nobody. But if he could’ve felt something, he would’ve been consumed with indescribable hatred towards DiZ that stood between him and Sora’s pod.

His mouth was unbelievably dry, his eyes burning and his ears ringing with rage. His skin still prickled with the waves of heat that had scorched his skin from Axel’s attacks, and he swore he could smell brimstone in the air from the flames. Seeing DiZ waiting for him, both arms crossed behind his back and no emotion in his amber eyes, felt like a desecration to all the memories that had been laid to rest within these walls. DiZ had already made his feelings towards Nobodies very clear - Vanitas still remembered the snarl on his face as he spat that he didn’t deserve to live, that he didn’t exist and was better off forgotten. He felt sick.

“At last, the Keyblade’s chosen one,” DiZ stated, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“Who are you talking to?” Vanitas demanded. “Me? Or Sora?!”

“To half of Sora, of course,” he replied, as if it should have been obvious to the Nobody. “I am a servant of the world, and if I’m a servant then you should consider yourself a ‘tool’, at best!”

Vanitas wanted nothing more than to destroy the man in front of him, to tear into him with his Keyblades and scatter his remains across the pristine white floors. He was supposed to be spending time with Hayner, Pence and Olette, scrambling to finish their school project and taking last minute trips to the beach to eat watermelon and do nothing while they were still young. Now his memories were a lie, his friendships fabricated, his existence meaningless. The real Hayner, Pence and Olette didn’t even know he existed; they continued to go about their lives and the world continued to turn without him in it. He felt so small, so insignificant knowing that his impact on the world could be swept away so easily. It just wasn’t fair.

“Was that… supposed to be a joke?! Because I’m not laughing!”

Vanitas couldn’t take it anymore. He summoned the Kingdom Key into his hand and lunged at DiZ, slicing into him again and again and again. His form shimmered as the weapon passed through his body every time, merely a data projection of the real man who was probably safe and
sound elsewhere while Vanitas had everything taken from him. It just wasn’t fair! Why did he have to give everything up for Sora, for someone who wouldn’t remember his name or his face and who would go on to have a life while he disappeared from existence. Why was his life worth so little in comparison to everyone else? Why did he have to die and Sora have to live?!

His frantic attack paused as the white pod shuddered to life before him, metal petals opening up to reveal the contents that slept within. Roxas Vanitas had never laid eyes on Sora, yet he knew exactly what he would look like before the pod revealed him. The aching void in his chest grew into a black hole that tried to pull him towards his Somebody, towards the boy who ultimately gave his life meaning. Roxas Vanitas supposed that Sora hadn’t asked for any of this either. They had both been thrown into a warzone before they were ready, both manipulated by those who considered their impact meaningless, and both left with shattered fragments of a heart that was once stronger than any other that came before it. Roxas Vanitas knew he wanted to be whole. He knew that Sora wanted that too.

It would be OK, it would only hurt for a moment. Roxas wasn’t afraid to die.

“Looks like my summer vacation is... over.”

Sora screamed in terror and flung himself backwards and away from Naminé, who had finally opened her eyes at the realisation that her control over the situation was gone. He tried to back up but his head collided with the lotus pod that loomed above him like the grim reaper ready to claim the heart that should have been snatched away years ago. He needed to get out of there, put as much distance between himself and the hearts that continued to scream into his ears and inside his head that just wouldn’t shut up no matter how hard he pleaded with them.

“Whoa, hey, what happened? Are you alright?!”

Xion ran up to him and tried to put a hand on his shoulder in comfort, but he batted it away with a yelp of fear. She had never seen Vanitas like this, cowering beneath her short frame like he was a caged animal fearing for its life. There was no recognition in his yellow eyes that were unfocused and clouded with terror at ghosts that Xion couldn’t see. She drew her hand back in shock. Vanitas was a Seeker of Darkness, a powerful Keyblade wielder and a threat to everyone around him. What happened to him to reduce him to a fearful child?

“Stop it, don’t touch me! It hurts, they won’t shut up!”

Roxas shone the light of his Gummiphone at Sora and then at Naminé with a look of horror on his face. The stark white light that used to fill the laboratory once seemed so sterile and unfeeling to him, but the piercing light from his Gummiphone and the endless black shadows cast by it were now even worse than anything that came before.

“What did you do?” Roxas whispered as Xion continued her futile efforts to soothe the black-haired Keyblade wielder’s panic.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Naminé insisted, the corners of her eyes prickling with restrained tears. “I didn’t mean to, I pushed him too hard! I was trying to help but I just made it worse, I- I- “

Vanitas threw both hands over his head and tried to block out the stimulus around him. The lights were too bright, the air was too heavy, his breathing was too loud. He was experiencing everything at four times the volume and it was so overwhelming that his thoughts were drowned under a sea of static. Sora tried to steady his breathing and bring his heart rate under control but his body wouldn’t
respond. He could feel Xion rubbing his back soothingly with one hand and trying to talk to him, but none of her words made sense.

He didn’t know who he was. He was four different people, but he didn’t know which one was him.

“I don’t know how it happened, but when I asked him to dig deeper into his memories he pulled through some of yours, it shouldn’t even be possible at this point, I wanted to finally do something but I just ruined everythi-“

“Naminé, stop,” Roxas cut across, squeezing her shoulder and shaking her gently before she could join in with Vanitas’ panic. “Take a deep breath. It’s OK. Breathe.”

Naminé followed his firm instruction and took a heavy breath, wrinkling her nose as stale air flew into her lungs. Sora had ceased in his wailing and was now sitting in silence, his head turned up towards the ceiling and a glazed-over look in his yellow eyes. Xion kept her hand on his shoulder like an anchor in a storm, but he didn’t respond to her words. Eventually a heavy silence fell over the room, the only sounds coming from Vanitas’ strained breathing and the occasional sniffle from Naminé as she scrubbed at the edge of her eyes to hold back the tears.

“… What happened?” Sora asked slowly, every word as loud as an explosion to his tired mind. His eyes remained affixed to the ceiling that was obscured by deep shadows as if the void extended into eternity above them.

“… I… I’m not sure,” Naminé replied, her legs shaking beneath her. “I think your heart resonated with the others when I tried to pull your deeper memories out. I don’t know how, but some of those memories leaked across the chain of memories to you, and…”

Sora considered her words, and nodded.

“OK…” he stated quietly. “I’ll be OK, I just need a moment.”

He closed his eyes and rested one hand over Xion’s, finally accepting her assistance and grounding himself with her touch. His metal jaw reflected the light pouring from the Gummiphones and scattering diamonds of light across the floor. Naminé was so sure it was going to work, so convinced that she could finally use her powers over Sora’s memories for his benefit. She so badly wanted to report some good news to Isa for a change and help push them towards their final goal of rescuing Sora from the situation he had found himself in. She wanted to be useful. She had just hurt him instead.

Were Sora and Vanitas’ hearts now so deeply intertwined that even Naminé’s powers weren’t enough to reach out to them?

Ansem’s old lab was such a hive of activity that moments of peace were as rare as a shooting star. Between Even tearing through the castle with various Replica body parts under his arms and Ienzo sitting at the computer for hours on end, it seemed the only time that calm fell over the castle was at night. Keen ears would still pick up the sound of footsteps echoing through the vast halls as Dilan and Aeleus continued to patrol the halls for signs of Heartless, but the resounding silence was like sweet music in the rooms that only knew anarchy.

That silence was immediately broken by a piercing alarm that screeched over the intercom, bright red warning messages flashing on every screen. Tron knew he should’ve let Cid connect his mainframe
to the rest of Radiant Garden.

Tron still found many of his users’ traits to be rather... incomprehensible. He knew that his interactions with Sora, Donald and Goofy should’ve taught him better than to try and apply logic to humans, but his computer brain wouldn’t rest until he had everything in a neat line. Everything could be quantified, had a place to store it and a number to store it under. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t force his Users to fit into the boxes he had built for them. They defied all reason that he could think of and it infuriated him to no end.

It was also the thing he loved most about Users. Their unpredictability was what made them so interesting.

Tron hadn’t stopped running simulations since he received the copy of Data-Sora’s data from King Mickey. His cores were on the verge of overheating but he had stopped caring. If it hadn’t been for Sora, the MCP would’ve overrun Radiant Garden with his artificial Heartless and Tron would’ve had his data dumped in the Recycling Bin. One thing that he had grown to love about humans was their willingness to repay acts of kindness, even at their own expense. Such a concept was completely foreign to the digital world – each program acted the way they were configured to and never strayed outside the perimeters of their coding. Tron himself was nothing more than 1s and 0s, and the last time he had attempted to add a 2 he had almost burned the castle down. The idea of ‘selflessness’ seemed to be unique to Users, but it was one he was interested in exploring.

Thankfully his work was significantly easier now that he had taken control of the mainframe after the MCP was de-rezzed. He wouldn’t have had enough processing power as a simple security program, and the ability to watch cat videos on the internet while he worked was a nice bonus. The fragmented shreds of codes left from Data-Sora really showed their age – the construction was archaic and there were logic loops everywhere, but Tron supposed that was more accurate to Sora’s personality. His simulations were bolstered once Naminé offered her assistance; she had failed to untangle the chain of memories within Sora’s heart but it provided valuable insight into his state of mind. Data-Sora was useful, but it couldn’t hold a candle to the real thing.

Naminé’s data was the very thing that had caused him to trigger the alarm. It had raised a concern that he would’ve completely missed and it needed to be assessed now.

Tron felt a surge of relief through his circuits as Ienzo stumbled into the room, grey hair sticking up in every direction and rubbing his eyes with exhaustion. He immediately silenced the alarms now that the intended recipient had responded, sacred silence falling over the lab and fragile peace returning.

“For the love of God, if this is because I won’t let you update iTunes I’m unplugging you,” Ienzo groaned. He was much less agreeable when he was running on such little sleep.

“Both of those actions are inadvisable.” Tron replied, removing the red warning messages from his screen and switching to a display of his results.

“I’ve finished assessing the data from Naminé and Sora is in critical danger.”

Ienzo’s tiredness immediately lifted at the program’s words and he slid into his computer chair, leaning into the soft leather and wheeling across the floor until he reached the terminal. Tron brought up the 3D render of Sora and Vanitas’ hearts that he had generated from the first scan.

“What have you found?” Ienzo probed, inspecting the content of the screen with precision.

“This render was how Sora’s heart appeared when you took the first readings,” Tron explained.

“Instead of summoning Vanitas back to the castle for a follow-up, I’ve been comparing Naminé’s
reports against the records of Sora’s personality from Data-Sora, and the results are dramatically
different. Moreover, every single simulation has provided the similar results.”

Tron moved the screen away from the render and showed Ienzo the data he had collated on a graph.
Some points on the graph deviated massively, but there was a very clear pattern that couldn’t be
ignored.

“Vanitas has begun describing memories that he should not have access to, and Sora has begun to
forget memories that he should not have. Moreover, both are now recalling Vanitas in Sora’s place.
Based on current projections, Sora’s heart had begun to merge with Vanitas’ and the stimulation of
his memories has only hastened the process, not delayed it.”

Ienzo groaned heavily and rested his head in his hands. Tron was tempted to request the scientist
remove his elbows from his keypad before he accidentally activated Sticky Keys, but figured it
wasn’t the best time to be pedantic.

“That was exactly what I was hoping you wouldn’t say,” Ienzo mumbled, his fingers intertwined
with the silver strands of his hair. “I suspected this would be one possible outcome, but the pros so
heavily outweighed the cons. It was better to try something than to do nothing. We’ve just made it
worse.”

Tron was impressed by how invested Ienzo had gotten in Sora’s predicament. The scientist had
every right to walk away, to declare that this was out of his area of expertise and try to summon
Ansem in his place. Strange, he could think of one other User who also had a habit of shouldering
the weight of others in their time of need. Maybe he and Sora had more in common than he first
thought.

“I believe we may still have time. Sora has not yet described himself in Vanitas’ place, only the other
way around. This indicates that the meld may be one-sided.”

Ienzo didn’t respond at first, and Tron was concerned he was already so deep in despair that their
research had all been for naught. The scientist eventually leaned back heavily in his chair, the
furniture creaking as he pushed the back support further than intended. He really did have terrible
posture.

“(You know, Vanitas only ever had half a heart. One completely devoid of light,” he mused,
partly to Tron and partly to himself. “If it seeks to devour a source of light so it can be whole, then
the constant surge of memories from Sora may have presented his heart as the light it seeks. I wonder
if Vanitas has realised it himself.”

“Judging from his last visit, I don’t think we could call him back to answer that.”

Ienzo snorted at Tron’s words. If he thought Sora was stubborn then his unwilling twin put him to
shame. He had never met someone so hostile and argumentative who was also willing to go along
with a crazy scheme that had such a slim chance of success. He wondered how much of his
personality came from Ventus and Sora, and how much of his personality was his own.

“That would explain why the merge seems so one-sided,” he continued. “Sora’s heart may be
damaged, but it was whole at one point. If we could just find the three parts of his heart that have
gone missing, we could get him into a Replica body today. I always wondered just how much of
Sora’s heart was left over in his Nobodies…”

“Rather than trying to repair his heart so he can survive in a Replica, would it not be more logical
to simply find his body?”
Find his body?

Of course, why hadn’t he thought of that before! Sora’s heart was still beating, so his body must be alive somewhere in the endless cosmos! Otherwise he would’ve become a Heartless or been lost to Kingdom Hearts long before Vanitas picked him up. They wouldn’t need to bolster his heart at all if they could just get him back in his original body! Ienzo jumped to his feet, sending his chair clattering to the floor behind him but paying it no mind. The cogs in his brain were already spinning with the formulation of a new hypothesis. Perhaps things were not as dire as they once appeared.

“Tron, search through your archives for information regarding transferring a heart between hosts,” Ienzo commanded, the computer screen flashing before his eyes as the program immediately got to work. “Then, notify the King. Sora’s body can’t have ended up anywhere pleasant, and we’re going to need all the Keyblade Masters we have.”

He reached forth and unplugged his Gummiphone from its charging point plugged into Tron’s tower and leeching of its power source. For someone so technologically-minded, Ienzo really didn’t understand the craze behind cellular phones and how everyone seemed to be glued to their screens, but it wasn’t so different from his own obsession with cyberspace. He unlocked it with his PIN and loaded up the Messenger app, flicking over to the contact he had in mind. He was desperate to know how Naminé’s foray into Sora’s shattered memories had gone and if it had turned up any new information that they could use to pinpoint Sora’s body. The brunette’s memories may no longer be his own, but the answers he sought had to be somewhere within the depths of his heart.

Ienzo just hoped Riku still remembered how to Dive.
re:Learn

Chapter Summary

I think this chapter ended up having the biggest rewrite of all of them so far. Funnily enough, the final scene on the beach was one of the first scenes I imagined when I wrote my road map for this story, and has remained almost completely unchanged. I hope it was worth the wait.

Riku knew that being a Keyblade Master wasn’t going to be a walk in the park, but he hadn’t expected to be run off his feet so soon.

Sora always insisted that he didn’t care much for the title, that his prowess was known across the worlds long before he even knew the rank existed. The brunette had slain countless Heartless, toppled despots, and reunited hearts without a badge of honour to somehow mark him as worthy of adoration by those who weren’t blessed with a Keyblade. Riku knew that was a load of hot garbage. There was no ignoring how his ocean-blue eyes lit up with awe as Yen Sid summoned the two to undertake the Mark of Master; there was no hiding how his chest puffed out in pride as he finally received the praise that he had more than earned time and time again. The prestigious title of Keyblade Master clearly meant a lot to Sora, and the only person fooled by his façade was himself.

Riku was quite content to go his entire life without sitting the Mark of Mastery. After being freed from Xehanort’s corrosive influence, every ounce of energy left in his battered body was dedicated to righting the destruction he had wrought under the old man’s name. He didn’t care about being recognised for his work – hell, he had operated under a different appearance during his darker period – nor did he care about petty trophies or meaningless accolades. What he did care about was Sora, and seeing his whole body burst with excitement at the prospect of achieving the title of Master had made his mind up for him.

Perhaps the Mark of Mastery could be a stepping stone in his path to redemption, and Sora certainly couldn’t do the task alone. It had been so long since Riku felt like he was needed, that he was wanted; his heart just wouldn’t allow him to walk away.

That hadn’t turned out exactly how he imagined it would. Riku had risen to the top and secured the title of Keyblade Master for himself, and Sora had been left on the bottom rung after Xehanort almost suffocated his heart with darkness. Some Dream Eater he was.

When Vanitas had dragged himself up that beach like a waterlogged zombie after plummeting out of the night sky in a flurry of light, Riku had fully intended to chain the Seeker of Darkness to himself. Vanitas stood before him with barely a fraction of his former power to his name, but he knew how manipulative and conniving he could be. The malicious glow in his yellow eyes hadn’t dimmed and the arrogance in his posture hadn’t waned, even though he was utterly defenseless. He didn’t trust Ventus’ dark-half as far as he could throw him, which was admittedly pretty far. If there was ever a time to pull rank as one of only two Keyblade Masters remaining in their ragtag group, then that time had come.

Unfortunately, fate had other plans for the silver-haired boy. As Keyblade Master, the unforgiving task of traipsing through the countless worlds touched by the heart of the ‘Key to Everything’ and
uncovering as much valuable information as he could lay his hands on ended up falling squarely on his shoulders. Riku barely had time to sit down and rest since he allowed Vanitas to skulk off towards Traverse Town with Kairi and Xion. He tore through the absurd archives owned by Mickey and Ansem the Wise like a raging tornado, scrambling for the smallest hint or clue to push them in the right direction. The frequent detours he made to check on the carnage that Vanitas left behind in every world he dragged his sorry ass through only slowed his progress, but it was a setback he was willing to accept. Riku was fully aware of the immense power and competence within the hearts of his friends and he didn’t doubt their abilities for one second, but Vanitas was a ticking time bomb.

He was astounded to find that every world unfortunate enough to endure Vanitas’ caustic presence had been left relatively unscathed, until his feet landed in Thebes. Hercules could defend him until he was blue in the face, Vanitas had caused the Grecians an awful lot of trouble.

Riku sprinted up the steps of Yen Sid’s tower, marble stone flashing beneath his feet as his weight triggered the magic that flowed through the rock like life-giving blood. Curse the old fart for still not installing an elevator. He swore this climb got longer and longer every time. Riku had been skulking around Twilight Town when he received the call to arms, sent in the form of a tiny bluebird with a very loud chirp and a rolled-up parchment tied around its neck with a scarlet ribbon. Yen Sid clearly did not appreciate modern technology, but the message was received loud and clear. The plan had changed and Riku was needed back at the Mysterious Tower for something. Thankfully, he was only a stone’s throw away; the train stopped at Sunset Station. He just ignored all the prying stares as he appeared to stand at an empty platform, the purple train invisible to those lacking the spark of magic.

Riku plopped down onto the satin cushioned seat as the train jerked to life, getting himself comfortable and absentmindedly flicking through his Gummiphone. Yen Sid wasn’t the only one who was allergic to technology – Ienzo had been signed up for the Messenger app for months and he had never so much as logged on once. The scientist was always locked away in a dark room somewhere, fingers glued to his keyboard and eyes straining with exhaustion. It was a miracle he even left the castle at all. Yen Sid may have issued Riku’s summons, but the old wizard was as obnoxiously cryptic as always and had neglected to include anything besides his orders and his name. The only thing he had to go off was what little Ienzo was willing to disclose, and that wasn’t much.

guest1337: Hello everyone, I must inform you that there has been a change of plan.
guest1337: Vanitas, awfully sorry to bother you, but please could you and Naminé make your way to the Mysterious Tower pronto. Yen Sid would like to talk some things over with you.
 aoSora: lu u the fkin hel r u
 Master_Aqua: Is this… another message from an unknown number?
Luna_Diviner: LEA DID YOU ADD A RANDOM PERSON TO OUR GROUP CHAT AGAIN?!
 soHoI'mOnFire: not me this time I swear!!!
 number_imaginary: please i cant do this again
number_imaginary: ive only just recovered from when sora showed back up
 sweet_memories: this entire group chat is a mess
 guest1337: Pardon?
guest1337: Oh, my apologies. One moment please.
 [guest1337 has changed their username to: CloakedSchemer]
Luna_Diviner: lenzo?
 still_not_a_master: bout time you used that phone
 CloakedSchemer: Hold on, I don’t want to associate with that name any more.
[ CloakedSchemer has changed their username to: Mad_Scientist]
 Riku: I SUPPOSE THATS A BIT MORE ACCURATE
10_year_nap: wot on earth is goin on rite now (°LOSE°)
Mad_Scientist: No wait, that’s not particularly flattering.
aoSora: JUST PIK A FKIN NAME 4 CHRISTS SAKE
[Mad_Scientist has changed their username to: Sane_Scientist]
Sane_Scientist: Ah, much better.
Sane_Scientist: Anyway, where was I?
aoSora: i stg
Sane_Scientist: Oh, that’s right. We’re ceasing all attempts to reinforce Sora’s heart and will endeavour to locate his body instead.
Sane_Scientist: Sora doesn’t need to be strong enough to survive in a Replica if he has his own body back.
aoSora: i new it man all this bulshit goin round worlds n fitin stuf woz 4 nothin
number_imaginary: i don’t know if i would say it was for nothing :)
Riku: EVEN WILL BE GLAD WERE NOT STEALING ANOTHER REPLICA FROM HIM
Sane_Scientist: He was indeed. Riku, I need you to come with Vanitas and Naminé, you’re an important part of this plan.
Riku: OMW

Riku had dropped everything at thought of finally making progress in their mission, of finally bringing Sora back home where he belonged, but there was a shadow in his heart that refused to be swept aside. Riku wasn’t exactly the ‘academic’ type and hadn’t given more than a fleeting glance to the myriad of books and scrolls that lined every wall of Yen Sid’s tower, but he was pretty sure there was more to this than just finding Sora’s corpse and shoving his heart back inside. Besides, if it was that easy then what role did Naminé have to play? She wasn’t a Keyblade wielder, she couldn’t traverse the Realm of Darkness or quell the tide of Heartless. Surely the mission called for Aqua or Mickey; surely three Keyblade Masters were better than just him?

What information had Ienzo stumbled upon that was so ground-breaking that he refused to share? And what sort of danger was Sora in to have caused such an abrupt change of plan? Riku grimaced as the train bumped him around as it crossed the portal between worlds, the vast expense of green forest hugging Twilight Town like a mother’s embrace now washed away by vibrant purple and orange clouds as the Mysterious Tower loomed in the distance. He set up a private chat between him and Ienzo and made one final attempt to pry the answers out of the scientist before he was forced to disembark the train.

Riku: YOU KNOW
Riku: I MAY NOT BE THE SHARPEST TOOL IN THE SHED
Riku: BUT I LIKE TO THINK I CAN TELL WHEN SOMEONE IS KEEPING SOMETHING FROM ME
Sane_Scientist: Riku.
Sane_Scientist: I know how this looks, trust me.
Sane_Scientist: I used to be a member of Organization XIII so I don’t blame you at all for your distrust, but I can only implore you to believe me.
Sane_Scientist: This wasn’t a decision made lightly: King Mickey and Tron both agreed that changing the plan is the best option for Sora.
Riku: SO THEYRE IN ON THIS TOO
Riku: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OTHER PIECES OF SORAS HEART
Sane_Scientist: We have an idea, but by the time we find out for sure it’ll be too late. We need to move now while we still have a chance.
Riku: WHAT DO YOU MEAN TOO LATE
Riku: WHATS HAPPENING TO SORA
Sane_Scientist: I’m sorry Riku, I promise I’ll come to you with more information next time.
Even the arduous slog up Yen Sid’s tower couldn’t shake off the anxiety breeding inside Riku’s heart. He should’ve known Mickey wouldn’t be honest about their intentions – the damn mouse never was – but he wasn’t just some kid swept off an island anymore! If their discovery was so vital that it had completely swayed the tide and pushed the Guardians of Light towards a new goal, then surely the Keyblade Masters should be the first to know?!! Riku clenched his fists until he almost drew blood from his shaking palms. There had better be a good explanation for this, and he wasn’t going to tolerate the evasive silence for much longer.

Riku thrust the heavy double-doors open without a second thought for the battered hinges and stormed into the study. Vanitas and Naminé were already present, standing in stony silence in front of Yen Sid’s desk like soldiers in a line. Naminé twirled a lock of her golden hair in her fingers with her eyes firmly glued to the floor, and Vanitas’ broad shoulders were raised as if his hackles were up. Yen Sid smiled gratefully as the silver-haired Keyblade wielder entered his room, thankful to have someone to hopefully talk some sense into the young Seeker of Darkness. Trying to get through to Vanitas was like talking to a slab of concrete.

“Ah, Riku,” Yen Sid smiled, his smooth voice cutting through the tension in the air like a knife through butter. “Thank you for joining us. I believe you’re just in time.”

Vanitas shot Riku a dark glower as if he was trying to burn a hole straight through his skull. It was a look that he had found himself on the receiving end of many times before, but his yellow eyes weren’t just overflowing with their usual malice. If Riku looked deep enough, he could almost sense a slight hint of… betrayal?

“What, are you in on this too?!” Vanitas demanded, making Naminé wince at his raised tone.

“No idea what you’re talking about, bud,” Riku replied calmly, his expression as stoic as ever. He stepped into line alongside Vanitas and Naminé, placing himself between the two like a living barricade. Naminé threw him a grateful smile before her eyes returned to the floor.

“So, what’s going on?”

“They want to poke around inside my brain!” Vanitas yelled as Yen Sid opened his mouth to explain. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you damned Guardians of Light, is nothing sacred to you?!”

“Now, now, I know you’re upset, but your understanding of Dropping is rather lacking,” Yen Sid droned, sitting back heavily in his chair. These young Keyblade wielders were going to be the death of him.

“Dropping?” Riku probed, ignoring Vanitas’ flagrant cursing. “You mean… Dropping into a dream?”

Yen Sid nodded slowly. Riku crossed his arms as his irritation was replaced by confusion. God, he hadn’t Dropped in many months, not since the ill-fated Mark of Mastery exam where Sora was almost consumed by his nightmares and joined the ranks of the Seekers of Darkness. He hadn’t found the strength to cross the barrier between sleep and wakefulness since, not after Lea had to step in where he had failed and carry his best friend home over one shoulder. He had inadvertently taken on the role of Sora’s Dream Eater, a being that could walk the narrow line between the Realm of Sleep and the Realm of Light, and who could devour Nightmares that sought to bring darkness into a sleeping heart. What a fat load of good that was – Sora had almost died.

“That’s correct,” Yen Sid replied. “Naminé, could you explain to Riku what it was you found when you tried to access Sora’s memories please.”
Naminé gasped lightly as her name was brought into the conversation, tucking the piece of hair that she had been playing with behind one ear before she scalped herself. She turned to Riku, her blue eyes flickering around the room in doubt, before finding her inner strength and taking in a deep breath.

“Everyone that has spent time with Vanitas and Sora has reported the same thing,” she began, choosing her words carefully to avoid confusing the already flustered Riku. “The longer they spend stuck together, the more Sora’s memories become intertwined with Vanitas’. At first, he was able to tell when things weren’t adding up. Xion and Kairi reported that Vanitas knew he wasn’t actually present when Sora made the oath to protect her in the tunnels beneath Traverse Town.”

“I’m standing right here, you know,” Vanitas spat. Both Naminé and Riku ignored him.

“But as time goes on, their hearts are becoming more and more muddled together. Now it’s getting harder for them to tell when a memory shouldn’t belong to them, and Ienzo is worried that we may be running out of time.”

Riku nodded, following along with her explanation as best as he could. That explained the sudden shift away from strengthening Sora’s heart to begin focusing on getting him free of Vanitas. It didn’t explain why the change was made so suddenly and with no input from Sora himself, but he doubted that Naminé could clear any of his confusion regarding that. If Ienzo wasn’t willing to share that knowledge with him, then Naminé was likely even more in the dark.

“I tried to use my powers over Sora’s memories to help… unravel their hearts a little,” she continued, her voice wavering slightly as her heart remembered the impenetrable cobweb that the chain of memories within the brunette’s heart had become. “But… it didn’t go as planned.”

“I’ll say!” Vanitas butted in, upset that at being excluded from a conversation that ultimately revolved around him. “You know, I’ve been dragging myself up and down mountains, kicking Heartless ass, and putting up with your sour faces. I’m getting real sick of your shit!”

“Now, now, nothing will come of petty name-calling,” Yen Sid stated calmly, attempting to defuse the ticking time bomb that was Vanitas before he exploded. “We need to think of what is best for Sora.”

“You know, you keep saying that but I don’t think you know what’s best for me either!” Sora exclaimed, his own irritation mingling with Vanitas’ fiery temper and brewing a volatile stew of discontentment in his heart. “Not once has anyone asked me what I think about this whole mess! That’s messed up, man.”

“Vanitas, knock it off,” Riku growled, his eyes darkening with seething rage. “Don’t you dare talk to Master Yen Sid like that.”

“Riku, I’m serious.” Sora insisted as the ferocious expression on his best friend’s face sunk into his bones and turned his blood to ice. “I’m not all that keen on you running around inside my dreams either! It’s like everyone’s already decided that I’m going to agree to all of this, and it’s not fair!”

The rapidly escalating situation was brought to a screeching halt as Yen Sid abruptly pushed himself to his feet, the sound of wooden chair legs screeching against the exposed stone floor resounding throughout the tower. The wizard towered above the young Keyblade wielders as the velvety-blue cap upon his head added several inches to his height, like an obelisk or totem of immense power that forced the arguing boys into silence. The sudden movement sent sparks of pain shooting across his old and tired joints, but Yen Sid refused to allow his weakness to show on his face in the presence of those who relied so heavily on him for guidance.
There was something wriggling about in the back of his mind ever since Ienzo had presented the culmination of his research to the wizard; a thought that refused to be stifled, or perhaps a worry that refused to be silenced. It was like a worm had buried into his brain and driven him to the brink of irrationality. Sora was an exceedingly capable warrior – if a little dense – but Yen Sid couldn’t compare the individual standing before him to the soggy, grumpy Seeker of Darkness that was dragged through his doors by his ear after being spat out by the Door to Light. Vanitas was cold, calculating, manipulative. This boy was anxious, ready to snap at a moment’s notice with betrayal in his eyes and poison on his tongue.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Yen Sid said, not sorry for interrupting in the slightest, “But I need you to answer this honestly – to whom are we speaking to right now?”

“BOTH OF US!” Sora and Vanitas yelled at the same time.

A beat of silence that seemed to stretch into eternity washed over the room as both Vanitas’ and Sora’s voiced bellowed out of their shared mouth at the same time. Their yellow eyes widened in shock and they clamped their hands over their mouth as if they could somehow force the words back inside. Riku and Naminé shared identical expressions of horror as the severity of what they had just witnessed began to sink in, but Yen Sid’s face remained in a serene, unfailing smile.

He nodded. This was exactly what he had feared, and also what he was looking for.

“That settles it,” he droned, sitting back down in his chair in finality. “We’re doing this tonight. Your hearts are too dangerously intertwined and we may not have much time left.”

Naminé moved to place a reassuring hand on Sora’s and Vanitas’ shoulder, but the two were frozen solid like a deer in headlights. Their hands were glued to their mouth with enough force to leave an imprint of their metal jaw piece on their palms, and their sickly yellow eyes were affixed to the floor with a look of unadulterated terror. She winced and withdrew her hand. Any comfort she could offer was hollow in the knowledge that she couldn’t possibly relate to their situation. Naminé had always despised her powers and how they made her a target for Xemnas’ eternal revulsion towards anything with a pulse, but in that moment she would’ve given anything to grant her control over Sora’s memories to Xion or Roxas.

Naminé would never be able to understand Sora like they did. She would never have the same connection to his heart that they did. Such an unpleasant thought left a feeling of emptiness spreading throughout her chest.

Sora and Vanitas had fallen into such a deep state of shock that Riku practically had to drag them out of Yen Sid’s study and toss them unceremoniously into a bed in a nearby guest room. Despite the Mysterious Tower appearing just as tall and lanky as its master, it had no shortage of extra rooms and corridors that extended far beyond where the borders of the stone walls should’ve ended. Riku wasn’t certain whether to be relieved that Vanitas’ sour demeanor soon returned with a bang, or to be disappointed that he didn’t get to enjoy the silence as long as he wanted. Every time he had the misfortune of being in Vanitas’ presence, the black-haired Keyblade wielder had always been bursting with uncontrollable wrath and spitting insults at anyone who dared approach him. Seeing the ex-Seeker of Darkness in such a reserved and reflective demeanor… it didn’t really suit him.

Naminé handed Vanitas a cup of peppermint tea.

Vanitas gave her a suspicious glower as if she was handing him a goblet of poison, but she simply offered him a patience smile in return. He tentatively accepted the gift, feeling the warmth of the beverage seep through his leather gloves and hug his fingertips. The rivulets of steam curling up from the contents of the cup danced in front of his vision like a translucent parade, and a crisp minty smell
kissed his nostrils. Vanitas swirled the light-green tea around inside the porcelain mug, flecks of loose tea leaves bobbing in the waves like lily pads on a pond.

“You know I don’t need to eat or drink, right?”

“I know,” Naminé smiled, unperturbed by his hesitant attitude. “It’s peppermint tea. It helps me sleep, so maybe you could give it a try?”

Vanitas wrinkled his nose in disbelief and scoffed at her outrageous statement, but lifted the mug to his lips and took a small sip nonetheless. He could imagine Riku slipping a pinch of poison or spoonful of sleep medication into the drink while he wasn’t looking, but Naminé hadn’t presented herself as someone prone to malicious conniving. The rush of mint sent pleasant tingles across his taste buds, but the heat that spilled down his throat and into his stomach as he swallowed just made him feel nauseous.

“…Is it bad?” Naminé questioned nervously as an expression of disgust set itself into Vanitas’ features.

“No, its fine,” he reassured her. “It takes OK, I just don’t like the way it feels in my stomach.”

Naminé let out a sigh of relief as Vanitas begrudgingly sipped the drink. That was as much of a compliment as she would ever hope to receive from him, and it was certainly far more than she had expected.

“I know how you feel,” she replied happily. “I have a Replica body, so I don’t need to drink either. I just like the taste of food enough that I made myself get used to the feeling.”

Vanitas couldn’t relate to the motives behind Naminé’s words, but there was a glimpse of logic within her statement. The peppermint tea left a refreshing flavour in his mouth, a sensation that he had never experienced before, but the scalding pool of tea that sat in his stomach radiated heat across his whole body as if he was in a sauna. There was no denying that the drink was delicious, but Vanitas didn’t have enough patience to build up a tolerance to the uncomfortable feeling of it weighing down his belly. He barely had enough patience to finish a whole sentence! He simply frowned and downed the rest of the beverage in one enormous gulp before the burning in his stomach changed his mind.

“Does everything have to be so aggressive with you?!” Riku exclaimed from the corner as Naminé watched in horror as the raven boy up-ended his mug and chugged the contents.

“YES,” Vanitas growled back, wiping the back of his mouth with his sleeve and setting the mug down. “Now, will the two of you please get out. I’m not gonna catch any Z’s with you hovering over me.”

Riku’s piercing cyan eyes peered out from the dark corner he was brooding in, arms crossed and eyebrows furrowed in distrust. The only way off the island and back to Twilight Town was via the train, and there was no chance the locomotive would reveal itself to Vanitas. That being said, it would reveal itself to Sora. Riku had trusted the brunette to keep Vanitas in line, pulling the strings from his bastion within his heart and jumping in to stop him from running off or lashing out. Now that he had given voice to his own reservations regarding the Dream Drop, Riku couldn’t rule out the possibility that he would go rogue and disappear into the night with Vanitas if they were let out of his sight.

“Not a chance,” he grumbled. “I’m not leaving until you go to sleep and I can get to work.”
Vanitas was on the verge of jumping up off the bed and pummeling Riku into the ground, but Naminé stepped in and cut him off before the two could start fighting again.

“Yes, we’ll give you some privacy,” she nodded to him, drawing a frustrated moan from Riku as she contradicted him refusal. “Besides, I’ll just be outside. Little do you know, I’m the real Struggle Champion!”

Naminé flashed a cheeky wink and curled her right arm, flexing her non-existent bicep. Vanitas spluttered and choked as he tried to swallow a guffaw that threatened to tear its way out of his throat at the sight of the blonde’s weak muscle pathetically twitching under her pale skin. Riku almost jumped in to berate him for poking fun at his friend, until he noticed that Naminé was openly chuckling back. She hooked one arm under Riku’s and softly dragged him towards the door while Vanitas tried to get his breath back. Naminé was lacking in the brute strength that flowed through Riku’s veins, but her power lay within her gentle and caring touch, and even Riku wasn’t immune to her coercion. He cast his gaze over his shoulder and jabbed two fingers towards his own eyes and then at Vanitas in warning. The raven boy shot him a rude gesture in response as the door shut behind him, leaving the two alone in the corridor.

“Riku,” Naminé whispered, the jovial expression that once graced her features now lost under a quagmire of concern. “I brought you out here to tell you something that didn’t come up earlier. Something that’s bothering me.”

“Oh?” Riku replied cautiously. The last time he had seen such ferocity in Naminé’s sky-blue eyes was when he dragged her kicking and screaming through a Corridor of Darkness as she tried with all her might to get a few comforting words to Roxas before he gave his life up. It wasn’t a look he enjoyed being on the receiving end of again.

“I think we both know that Ienzo and Yen Sid aren’t being completely honest with us,” she murmured, worried that her blasphemous words would reach the ears of someone dangerous if she spoke too loud. ‘I don’t disagree that shifting our focus towards the location of Sora’s body is the best decision we could make right now, but there’s something about this that isn’t sitting right with me. Why did they make the decision so suddenly? Why won’t they tell us what they found? And why didn’t they ask Sora for his input first?”

Riku crossed his arms and shifted his weight to one leg as he considered the implications of her words. A part of his heart told him that he was being too distrusting, that he had a track record of searching for malicious intentions where there were none. He was hesitant to declare that they were being deceived by the very people they called ‘friends’, but hearing someone else put voice to the concern that had been stewing inside his head was both reassuring and terrifying. Riku knew how to cope with his unreasonable anxieties. He didn’t know how to cope with being right.

“I said that I tried to unravel Sora’s and Vanitas’ hearts a little, and that part is still true,” she continued unabated. “What I didn’t tell you is why it didn’t work. Ienzo wasn’t lying when he said their hearts are becoming too dangerously intertwined. I kept trying to bring Sora’s memories to the forefront of his mind, to try and strengthen the line between his heart and Vanitas’ and to remind him of who he is and what he’s gone through, but it always ended the same. Each memory played as it was supposed to, but there was always a point where Sora was exchanged with Vanitas and neither of them even noticed.”

“That’s what I figured,” Riku sighed heavily, feeling his heart sink at the news. “But why do you say it so ominously? What happened that it didn’t work; what is Ienzo keeping from me?”

Naminé took a deep breath and prepared herself to light the fuse that would detonate a bomb. Her entire life had revolved around following the orders of those who held power over her; whether that
was Organization XIII, or DiZ, or Axel. The first time she had acted under her own agency and rebelled against those who sought to control her had been when she fled the Castle That Never Was with Kairi. The feeling of exhilaration as she finally took her fate into her own hands had never left her heart. Ienzo had pleaded with the blonde to keep her discoveries to herself, but it was about time she made a decision of her own.

Sora wouldn’t be afraid, so Naminé wouldn’t be either.

“… I pushed him too hard. I was so desperate to find just one memory where Sora couldn’t possibly mix up who experienced it, and I dug too deep. Riku, I don’t know how it happened, but Sora pulled through memories from Ven, Roxas and Xion.”

Riku felt his mouth run dry and his heart turn ice-cold. He gave Naminé a look like he was expecting her to call an early April Fool’s joke and laugh it off, but she could barely meet his gaze. His right hand reflexively balled up into a fist and his jaw clenched until it hurt.

“Are… you serious?” he insisted, praying that he was just the butt of a cruel prank. “That can’t be possible, they’ve all been freed from his heart already! There shouldn’t be a connection there anymore!”

“I know,” Naminé whispered back, her eyes flicking down the vacant hallway as Riku’s volume rose. “It could be that their hearts are still linked somehow, or maybe they just left a little piece of themselves behind when they were removed. Either way, I have no idea what you’ll see when you Drop.”

Riku groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. Sora was already such a confusing individual, he really didn’t need a woven web of intrigue surrounding him. He still remembered Dropping into his dreams as the tendrils of darkness tried to swallow him whole so Xehanort could slide into his place, and how he had fought his best friend clad in Ventus’ warped armour. Now he was facing the prospect of multiple dreams crossing over from every heart that left their grubby fingerprints all over Sora’s heart.

“I wonder if this has anything to do with the sudden shift away from the three missing pieces of Sora’s heart… Argh, this is so frustrating!”

Naminé felt a stab of fear pierce her heart as Riku bellow his exasperation down the vacant hallway, anxious that she had perhaps overstepped her boundaries and just made things worse. Thankfully he took a deep, stabilizing breath and ran a hand through his silver hair in an attempt to calm himself down. As desperate as he was to find something soft and squishy to punch and take his frustrations out on, Naminé was being kept in the dark as much as he was. There would be a time and place to vent his anger, and this wasn’t it.

“Thanks for letting me know, Naminé,” Riku finally stated. “I feel a bit better prepared to deal with whatever’s waiting for me. That’s more than anyone else has done so far.”

Riku was lying, and Naminé knew he was lying, but she still offered him a light smile in response. He was about to dive into the deep end without seeing what lay below the surface, a literal leap of faith in the hopes of dragging his best friend out before he drowned. There was no preparing for something like that, but the weight on his shoulders had lessened slightly. Riku craved the feeling of control, and having someone back him up was sending surges of strength through his bones.

Riku may have been a shoddy Dream Eater before, but now he had a chance to make it right.

“You’re welcome,” Naminé nodded, her shoulders finally relaxing now that the secret she had been
forced to carry had been released. “Just… please don’t be mad at Ienzo. I feel like he’s trying his best with what little he has to work with. Besides, I don’t think it was solely his decision.”

Riku felt the urge to argue that Ienzo was more than eligible to feel the full brunt of his wrath, but he knew Naminé had a point. There was no doubt in his mind that Mickey had something to do with that – that damned mouse always seemed to be knee-deep in some mystery. He sighed heavily as if the weight of the world was resting between his shoulder blades, and reluctantly nodded.

“OK, I promise.”

Meanwhile, Vanitas was staring up at the ceiling and counting his brain cells as they died from boredom.

It took every ounce of self-control not to leap up from the bed he was sitting on and make a break for it, but he knew that Riku would barge back in through that door if he so much as heard a floorboard creak under his foot. Vanitas was sitting cross-legged on top of the silky bed sheets with his arms crossed in an identical manner, having refused to slip into any pajamas or worm under the covers. A flickering candelabra stood to attention on the oak bedside table, and the cold stone wall pushed up against his back and soothed his rising temper. He could hear Riku and Naminé whispering something outside the room, but couldn’t make out the words. Probably something about trying to kill him.

*Not everyone is out to kill you, you know.*

Vanitas snorted and wriggled deeper into the soft mattress, the bed creaking beneath him with the motion. The lack of stimulus to keep his mind occupied only amplified his racing thoughts, echoing inside his head like a choir in a mausoleum. It was clear that he wasn’t going to be allowed out of this jail cell until he fell asleep and opened his heart to someone who didn’t hold him in the… highest regard. His face deformed as an angry snarl crossed his features. No one had the right to his heart, but the Guardians of Light were treating it like their property. His heart may not be completely his – he lay somewhere between Sora and Ventus – but it was all he had. There were things in there that he wasn’t ready to face himself, never mind show to someone else.

*I’ve been living in it, it’s not as bad as you think.*

Vanitas closed his yellow eyes and rested his head against the stone wall, feeling the chill spread across his scalp from the contact. He still wasn’t sure where he stood with the Guardians of Light. He didn’t blame those who wanted to stuff and mount his head as a trophy; he had tried to kill them all more than once and was pivotal in bringing about the end of all worlds so Xehanort could rebuild them in his image. Vanitas couldn’t even use the old ‘tricked into siding with the Seekers of Darkness’ card that Xion kept pulling. He had joined them because he wanted to, because he wanted to take all the pain from his heart and throw it back at the world. He wanted to make others hurt as much as he did. In the end, he had only hurt himself.

Maybe that was why so many of the new people Vanitas had met were so willing to accept him, when the Guardians of Light were eager to be rid of him. Jack, Hercules, Hayner… They were all so enthusiastic to include him in their circle of friends as if he slotted right into the hole that Sora had left behind. Perhaps it was because they were approaching him from a different viewpoint, one where they had no idea of the atrocities he had committed and the people he had slaughtered in his path to end his own existence. Vanitas rightly deserved the animosity thrown at him by Sora’s friends, but…

Well, it was nice to be appreciated for once. It was a feeling he had never felt before, and Vanitas could feel his heart growing more and more reliant on the warmth it gave him. It was just as frightening and it was comforting.
By the time Riku stuck his head back into the room, Vanitas had nodded off to sleep.

Riku couldn’t help but smile and shake his head. Even as the gentle embrace of sleep wrapped its arms around the slumbering Keyblade wielder, his arms remained firmly crossed and a scowl still lay across his face. If it hadn’t been for the gentle rising and falling of his chest and the soft snoring that vibrated from his throat, Riku would’ve suspected that Vanitas was faking his nap to lure him within stabbing distance. Not even the alluring call of sleep could pull that angry expression off his face. It was kind of endearing.

Riku quietly slid into the room and pulled up a chair, sitting down and getting comfortable across from the bed where the sleeping Seeker of Darkness lay. His cyan eyes struggled to adjust to the dense shadows that were cast across the room by the flickering candlestick, and for the briefest moment he swore it was Sora sitting upright on the bed, head tilted back in deep relaxation and spiky chocolate hair flattened against the wall behind him. He blinked and rubbed his eyes and the image shifted back to Vanitas before he could question if the vision was real. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, his heart praying for the smallest glimpse of his long-lost friend.

Either way, Vanitas was a lot more tolerable when he was asleep.

Riku sighed quietly and leaned back in his chair, placing his palms on his knees and closing his eyes. This was a position that Naminé had taken many times, and their intentions weren’t too different. The blonde could leap into Sora’s memories, but Riku could leap into Sora’s dreams. The brunette’s dreams weren’t particularly pleasant at the best of times, but Naminé had made it clear that this could be his most challenging Drop yet. Riku had already prepared himself to find a lot of overlap between Sora and his twin considering their memories had already begun to blur together into a hazy fog of confusion, but now there was potential for his dreams to be infiltrated by those whose hearts should’ve been separated from him months ago.

Was it truly Sora’s dream that Riku was about to Drop into? Or would it be someone else’s?

Sora really needed to stop handing out pieces of his heart to anyone that asked.

Riku could feel the tempest raging within his heart growing out of control and he forced himself to be still. He would need to keep his wits about him if he wanted any chance of dragging his best friend out of the mess he had gotten himself into. Sora would probably just face the situation with a goofy smile on his face, throwing his friend a thumbs up and diving head-first into danger without a second thought. Riku often prayed that Sora would gain a little more situational awareness, but his naiveté was a powerful shield against the cruelty of the world. It was a testament to his strength of heart that his innocence had remained aflame while the universe did everything it could to snuff it out.

Riku smiled to himself. He could envision Sora standing next to him, hands casually locked behind his head with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Riku had always wished that Sora would be a little more like him. Perhaps it was time for Riku to be a little more like Sora.

With that thought in mind, the corners of his mouth turned upwards, and he Dropped.

When Riku reopened his eyes, it was to a blindingly blue sky and the feeling of icy water sinking into his back.

He lay in complete stillness for a moment, cyan eyes affixed upwards as wispy white clouds floated...
by without a care in the world, before gasping and jolting upright. A cascade of water droplets rained down around him like fragile diamonds. An infinite expanse of salt flats greeted the silver-haired boy, glazed with a thin layer of water so blissfully clear that it formed a perfect reflection of the sky above. The mirror-image was so perfect that Riku’s eyes couldn’t make the distinction between land and sky where they touched at the horizon. The area was unnaturally still; the peaceful serenity mixed with a dreadful silence that sent chills running down his spine, and it wasn’t just because of the water that had soaked into the fibers of his jacket.

This… wasn’t what Riku was expecting Sora to be dreaming about.

He pulled himself to his feet with a strained grunt, the grey plaid trim of his pants stained almost black with the water that ran down his legs and into his boots. No matter which direction Riku turned his gaze, the salt flats seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. The only disturbances in the landscape were small, sporadic clusters of light, undulating and writhing until they created the image of a star before scattering back into a cloud of dim sparks. The smell of brine filled his nose and the sun that peeked just above the horizon felt icy cold and provided no warmth to his sopping skin. It was so quiet that Riku could even hear his blood rushing through his ears.

There was something about this place that reminded the silver-haired Keyblade wielder of the Underworld: an air of finality smothered the area like a heavy blanket, as if this world was the completely antithesis to the unbridled chaos that was ‘life’.

“… Sora?”

Riku called out his best friend’s name into the void, but the only reply was more unsettling silence. He was completely, truly alone. He shuddered. Riku had spent an unfortunate amount of time in Sora’s dreams – even though he hadn’t realised it at the time – and the brunette had only ever dreamt of places that he had visited and his heart was connected to. This place was so unearthly quiet that it was an affront to nature; he couldn’t imagine existing in a world where the clouds moved without wind and his voice carried without an echo.

Where exactly was he, and why was Sora dreaming of this place?

“Can’t stay away now, can you?”

Riku flinched and whirled around on the spot as a high-pitched voice hit his ears, the only sound resonating across the salt flats that wasn’t coming from his own breath. He was sure he stood alone as the only disruption against the reflection of the crystal-blue skies, until his cyan eyes locked onto a bright puff of pearlescent light that danced in a breeze that only it could feel. Off-tune singing pealed across the area as the light fluttered down to the ground, suddenly intensifying until Riku could barely stand to keep his eyes fixed on its radiance, before scattering into sparks of light that petered away into nothing.

In its place stood a small animal covered in dense grey fur, and with an opulent crimson purse fixed around its neck. It appeared as if a stuffed toy had come to life and gained a will of its own, its eyes closed sleepily as if it had joined Riku in the depths of Sora’s sleep. It was like nothing Riku had ever seen before, yet the creature wasn’t fazed by his appearance in the slightest.

“The name’s Chirithy,” it stated bluntly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, “and this is the Final World.”

Riku’s eyebrows raised incredulously and he bent down on one knee to get to the creature’s level. He could recognise a fellow Dream Eater when he saw one, but this grey feline was unlike any he had come across before. The neon nightmares that fought by his side during the Mark of Mastery
were by certainly not mindless animals, but they had never expressed anything other than an
unwavering desire to protect the one they had bonded to. They had certainly never spoken before.

“You’re… a Dream Eater?” Riku asked tentatively, unsure if he really wanted to know the answer.

“That’s right!” Chirithy replied, bouncing in happiness. “Boy, it’s been a while since another Dream
Eater found their way here! This is the end of the line, where those whose heart and body perish
together meet the end of their journey. There’s nothing else beyond this.”

The… end of the line? Was Chirithy referring to… death? Riku didn’t know whether to take the
information at face value or to probe for the deeper meaning that lay between the lines. There was a
very real possibility that these salt flats existed on a layer of Sora’s dreamscape that he hadn’t
wandered into before, that this was just a figment of the brunette’s imagination brought to life. Sora
was a light-hearted person with an indomitable purity, but even he must’ve considered the
consequences of falling at the hands of his foes. Was this a reflection of his subconsciousness: the
part of Sora that he was afraid to give voice to?

“But Chirithy, I’m not dead,” Riku insisted as the pit of worry in his stomach continued to grow.
“I’m asleep. Well… I’m in a dream, anyway.”

“Oh, I know that!” Chirithy replied, putting its stumpy hands on its hips as if it was scolding him.
“The edges of sleep and death touch, and one can’t help the occasional crossover. You may be
dreaming, but this place is very real.”

Now Riku was even more confused. He decided not to question it. After everything he had been
through and all the worlds he had explored, he knew better than to try and apply logic to anything
anymore.

“I’m looking for my friend,” Riku stated as Chirithy cocked its head to one side. “About yea high,
spiky brown hair, stupid grin on his face. Have you seen him?”

“Are you talking about Sora?” Chirithy questioned, scratching its droopy ear absent-mindedly. “He
comes through here a lot, but I haven’t seen him in at least three months. It’s a shame, this place is
pretty quiet without him…”

“You’ve seen Sora?!” Riku exclaimed, jumping to his feet and almost sending Chirithy staggering
backwards with the sudden movement. “Please, you have to take me to him! He could be in serious
danger!”

“Whoa, take it down a notch there!” the grey Dream Eater insisted. “Remember, the borders between
sleep and death are hazy. He’s not here, he’s already crossed back into his own dreams. ‘Bout time
too…”

If Chirithy had eyebrows, they would be furrowed in exasperation. It had grown to appreciate the
serenity of the Final World, the light rippling off the water and the gentle twinkling of the nameless
stars that lined the horizon. The first time that Sora had wandered onto the salt flats he had been a
tiny child, straddling the line between sleep and death before he could even walk. The brunette had
grown up into a raging whirlwind of energy and chaos, and Chirithy didn’t know how to deal with
that. It had been longer than it could remember since the Dream Eater had the company of anyone
other than the nameless stars, the souls trapped in the realm of sleep for so long that only their fragile
memories remained. It was nice to see a fresh face once in a while, but the way that Sora caused the
whole world to revolve around him without knowing it just made Chirithy’s head hurt.

“Shit,” Riku swore, standing back up to his full height and taking another look across the planes. If
this forlorn landscape was real, then the only option presented to him was to wake himself up and try
to Drop again, and he doubted Vanitas would agree to cooperate a second time. If this was just a
dream, then there had to be a path that would lead him deeper into Sora’s slumber…

“Wait, that’s it!” Riku exclaimed, snapping his fingers as his eyes lit up with realisation. “It doesn’t
matter if this is real or not! No matter how I look at it, no matter which way the road turns, it all leads
back to the same place. It all leads back to Sora.”

Riku felt a gust of wind caress his back as if applauding him for his realisation. A tall, imposing door
had manifested out of thin air behind him, formed of grey stone and carved with winding ivy stems.
The pinnacle of the gateway was topped with fragile stained glass that cast rainbows across the
water.

A peek to the rear of the door frame revealed that nothing lay beyond the threshold as if it was jutting
out of the earth itself, but Riku’s heart instinctively knew that something was lay hidden and would
only appear once the door was opened. Whatever the Final World was, whether it was real or not, it
was invariably tethered to Sora’s heart. All Riku had to do was call out, and Sora would answer.

“Hey Chirithy, you wanna come with?” Riku asked, placing one hand on the door to feel the
uncanny warmth that radiated from inside. “I could always use a fellow Dream Eater to keep me
company.”

“H-Huh?”

Chirithy was startled at such an outlandish proposal. It had spent so long plodding around the salt
flats of the Final World that it wasn’t sure if it even remembered how to be a Dream Eater at all! It
certainly couldn’t recall the last time it had faced off against a Nightmare, or how to use any of its
abilities. If Riku wasn’t confident in his own prowess as a Dream Eater then he must be expecting to
face something nasty, and Chirithy couldn’t say that it would be any use in a fight.

Still, Chirithy remembered what Sora had promised when they first met. The brunette had flashed his
signature grin, his heart radiating pure light despite how close to death he had come, and vowed to
find a way to return. Chirithy was free to leave the Final World whenever it wanted – a Dream Eater
could cross the border between worlds without much effort - but it never found a reason to. His
Keyblade wielder had long forgotten its name, and it had spent so long within the Realm of Sleep
that it couldn’t remember what existing truly felt like.

Perhaps this was a sign. Perhaps this was how Sora was going to rescue Chirithy from the Final
World. Not by returning himself, but through the actions of his own Dream Eater.

“Mm-hmm!” it nodded, trotting up to Riku as he began to push the door open. “It’ll be good to
stretch my legs for once!”

Riku nodded firmly and shoved against the door with all his weight, the threshold groaning as its
rusty and unused joints were forced to relent to his strength. A blast of warm air hit his face as the
gateway creaked open, sending out a shock wave that blew waves of salt water in all directions and
almost tore his jacket from his shoulders. The door might not have been physically connected to
anything, but passing across the threshold revealed a world of stained-glass windows embedded into
impossibly tall towers, circled by dense black fog and connected by walkways that often led away
into the void and out of sight. Tiny sparks of light danced across the void in a breeze that only they
could feel, rhythmically pulsing as if beating along with a silent heart.

“Ooh, Sora’s Station of Awakening is pretty!”
Chirithy scampered inside as if on a jaunty jog inside of traversing into the depths of the brunette’s heart. Riku followed its lead as the mysterious door slammed shut behind him and dissolved into flecks of light, sealing away any path back to the Final World. He clenched his fists and steeled his nerves – he was here for Sora, and he refused to leave without him. Riku had allowed his best friend to walk off into the jaws of death once before; he’d be damned if he was going to return without the brunette under one arm.

The staircase led down towards the plateau that was the closest pillar, the stained-glass depicting Sora in a restless sleep with Kingdom Key in hand and portraits of those he held closest to his heart framing his head like a halo. It felt like sacrilege to tread upon such an exquisite work of art, but it was the only way to tread deeper into Sora’s sleeping heart. An identical door awaited the pair across the other side of the mosaic, beckoning the two intruders to open its doors and face whatever lay beyond.

“You know, I’ve never actually been to the Station of Awakening before,” Chirithy mused, its stumpy feet pinging against the glass as it tapped across. “I always wondered what mine looks like…”

“Does everyone have a place like this?” Riku asked, shooing away the small flecks of light that fluttered around him and got tangled in his hair.

“Yup, although it’s not usually this big,” Chirithy replied, gesturing out to the multitude of pillars that jutted out of the impenetrable fog below. “Most people typically get one or two of those. It’s awfully roomy in here.”

Riku snorted in amusement and pushed the second door open without hesitation. Chirithy had no idea just how close to the truth it had strayed with its statement. Sora’s heart once sheltered at least three other hearts inside of it, along with all of Ansem the Wise’s research. He could even argue that Vanitas had spent some time in there after he perished during his failed attempt to merge with Ventus. Sora should really start charging rent.

Just as suspected, the door did not lead where Riku expected it to. The Station of Awakening didn’t seem to adhere to the laws of physics, which seemed awfully appropriate. After all, neither did Sora.

Riku and Chirithy found themselves in a cavernous cathedral, their steps echoing off the exposed stone walls until it sounded like an army was marching through the church. The stained-glass windows that stretched from floor to ceiling were a far cry from the ones within Sora’s heart – these mosaics reflected scenes of biblical pain and suffering, a man nailed to a cross and those who mourned him. The icy moonlight pouring in through the windows warped the bright luminous colours into cold, unfeeling greys and blues that cast a somber aura over the cathedral. It was chilling, and not just because of the temperature.

“Is this one of Sora’s memories?” Chirithy mused, its high-pitched voice echoing around the church like a chorus of angels.

“Mmm,” Riku agreed. “This is La Cité des Cloches. I’ve been here before too, during the Mark of Mastery.”

“Hypocrite. You are the one who has made your heart a prison.”

Riku and Chirithy flinched in sync as a dark, brooding voice cut through the placid air from deeper in the cathedral. The pair decisively nodded to each other in shared determination and sprinted towards the source of the voice. Riku was sure he had heard that gravelly voice before, and it didn’t bode well. It was the voice of Xehanort. Rather, it was the voice of young Xehanort. Just the
thought of that man’s name turned Riku’s blood to ice; even though this was likely just a living memory of Sora’s tumultuous experience during the doomed Mark of Mastery, the villain still posed a very real threat to the brunette’s ailing heart. He wouldn’t allow Xehanort to lay a single finger on his friend. Not again.

“You again! What are you talking about?!”

Riku darted under a stone archway to find Sora standing in the center of the cathedral surrounded by dusty pews and stained silk cloths. His sapphire blue eyes shone with an unholy mixture of rage and fear as a lanky man cloaked in a dark leather trench coat stalked towards him like a predator eyeing up its next meal. He felt as if his eyes couldn’t focus on the figure, the man appearing blurry and foggy as if the brunette was looking at him through a veil of tears. His image flickered between two different people, one with lock straight silver locks and the other with familiar ebony hair. Either way, those piercing yellow eyes were unmistakable and Sora was frozen in place like a deer in headlights.

“Even if you are not the prisoner.”

The figure purred his words in amusement at the frightened Keyblade wielder, so tiny and pathetic as he cowered before the presence of the villain. He chuckled, his sickly yellow eyes glowing in the darkness of the cathedral, and reached out to brush his fingers against Sora’s cheek. The brunette wanted so badly to back up and put some distance between himself and the approaching man, but his legs wouldn’t respond as if he was cemented to the floor. The leather gloves came within an inch of his face before the man was tackled to the floor by a whirlwind of silver hair and plaid clothes.

“Get your hands off him!”

Vanitas yelped and squirmed as Riku socked him hard in the face, shoving the furious Keyblade Master away and leaping to his feet. He dodged backwards as Riku sliced through the air with Braveheart where his neck used to be, just in time to keep his head attached to his shoulders. Sora looked on in shock, his legs still locked into place at the sight of the brawl that had broken out within the holy halls of the cathedral. The last time he had seen Riku was when they had split up to tackle different sleeping worlds, so what on earth was he doing here…?

“Riku?” he asked tentatively, as if the silver-haired boy was simply a figment of his imagination. “But… what are you doing here? What about the Mark of Mastery?”

“What?!” Riku yelled, turning his attention away from Vanitas and back to his best friend. “The Mark of Ma- Sora, this isn’t real. You’re asleep right now, I Dropped into your dreams. Remember?”

Sora looked at him with an endless ocean of confusion in his aqua eyes.

He opened his mouth to demand answers to his tsunami of questions: how was Riku standing before him with his hair much shorter than he remembered and the angle of his chin so much sharper as if he had aged before his eyes. Vanitas wasn’t having any of it.

“Well duh, I remember!” Vanitas spat back, summoning the Void Gear into his hand in case Riku tried to cut him in half again. “I also remember putting up a fight. The first time I ever get to dream, and I have you sticking your nose in it and grossing up the place.”

Riku reeled his arm back and prepared to strike at the snarling Seeker of Darkness, but before he could land a blow the shadows that seemed to circle them rose up as if surging to life. Small angular gremlins poured out from behind the pews and columns of the cathedral, jerking and twitching like
electricity ran through their veins with limbs ending in razor-sharp points. Before they knew it, the four were completely surrounded by the monsters.

“The Unversed?” Riku growled, taking several slow steps backwards as the Flood of monsters crept ever closer. “What are they doing here?”

“Hurry, this way!”

Chirithy jumped up and down frantically, waving its stumpy arms and gesturing towards yet another stone door that had fizzled into existence in front of the altar. Sora still had no idea what was going on, but he wasn’t in a position to argue. He sprinted towards the door as fast as his feet would carry him, his footsteps accompanied by the pounding of his heart and the echoing howls of the Unversed. Riku and Vanitas followed suit, putting their conflict to one side for the sake of high-tailing it out of there before things turned ugly. An important part of being a Keyblade Master was knowing when to make a tactical retreat, and there was no way he could take on a horde of Unversed that large.

The Flood scrambled after their retreating figures, clawing at their ankles and trying to scrape at the door before it could close and lock them within the cathedral forever. Vanitas practically kicked down the door in his hurry to vacate the premises and threw himself across the threshold, the door only slamming shut once all four members of the party were safely beyond its gateway.

Sora lay on the chilly glass for a moment, gasping for breath as the adrenaline slowly faded from his system. Panting surrounded him as the rest of the troupe came back to their senses and recovered from the wave of Unversed that had tried to sweep them away. He tried not to linger on his memories of the Mark of Mastery for fear of reigniting emotions that were better left buried, but that wasn’t at all how he remembered the encounter going! Riku should’ve been restoring the heart of a world trapped within the embrace of sleep, Sora hadn’t even encountered the Unversed at that point, and Chirithy should be wandering somewhere within the Final World…

“Wait, Chirithy!”

Sora jumped to his feet and swept the grey Dream Eater up in a bear hug, mushing his face into its squishy belly like he was cradling a teddy bear.

“I’m so happy to see you again!” Sora squealed, his voice muffled against the velvety grey fur. “How did you get out of the Final World?”

“We walked through a door,” Riku replied, smirking as Chirithy tried to wiggle its way free from Sora’s overbearing affection. He dusted himself off as the brunette rocked the Dream Eater back and forth like he was cradling an infant and cast his gaze across the room. They had been deposited back into the Station of Awakening, once more positioned on top of an impossibly tall pillar that led down into darkness. Only this time, the stained-glass was different. Riku was expecting to see Sora’s visage represented in the colourful glass, but instead it was Vanitas sleeping with the Void Gear in hand and embellished with the Unversed symbol like a twisted halo.

Weird…

“Wait,” exclaimed Sora, suddenly realising the impossibility of his situation. His grip on Chirithy relaxed to allow the Dream Eater to drop to the floor. Its eyes would’ve been spinning if they weren’t constantly closed. The last time the two had crossed paths was within the void of the Final World where Sora had vowed to rescue Chirithy from its thankless task of guarding the nameless stars. The Dream Eater had given him a sorrowful shake of its head and refused; what had changed in the interim that it would be standing in front of him like it had never left his side?
“Are you the real Chirithy? Or are you just a dream too?’”

Chirithy shook its head harshly, snapping itself out of its dizziness and almost losing its cape with the effort. It put one stumpy hand on its chin and cocked its head to one side in thought.

“Is there really a difference?”

Sora didn’t know how to answer that.

“So, what was with the Unversed?” Riku probed Vanitas who was dusting off his skirt. “You know we’re here to help, right?”

Vanitas scowled back at him, but Riku didn’t even flinch. At one point that expression would’ve filled him with dread, but the silver-haired Keyblade wielder had been on the receiving end of Vanitas’ ire so many times that it was just a drop in the ocean by comparison.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but they attacked me too,” he growled back, moving towards the door on the other side of his stained-glass pillar. “Besides, I don’t need the Unversed to get my way.”

Vanitas forced his way through the doorway before Riku had a chance to spit back, leaving the others in his dust. He was no stranger to the Station of Awakening, but the only other time he had set foot on the pigmented glass towers and been serenaded by a choir that hovered just out of view was during his final battle with Ventus. The raven boy wasn’t even sure that he had a Station of his own, not without a heart that was solely his own, but the vacuous expanse of Sora’s dreamscape sure put Ventus’ to shame. The sheer size was incomprehensible, but it carried with it an inescapable loneliness. Vanitas felt as if the Station of Awakening was so unfathomably large that he could wander the doors and climb the staircases for all eternity and never find his way out.

Xehanort had referred to Sora’s heart as a ‘prison’. Vanitas wondered if this was what he was referring to.

Sora knew where he was as soon as he passed through the door. The exquisitely decorated pillars vanished as the door frame swallowed him whole, depositing him in a utilitarian hallway with unfeeling grey walls and stark lights. It was the sort of place where creativity came to die, where the clinical atmosphere drained any individuality that remained to leave only empty husks behind. The only bursts of colour came from clumps of bright hair that were mushed into the fibers of the carpet, and the occasional sad-looking balloon.

“Is this… Monstropolis?” Sora mused to himself, eyeing up the area as if he barely recognised it. “Well, I do,” Vanitas replied, already halfway down the corridor. “There’s nothing ‘happy’ or ‘funny’ about this place. This was where I used the Unversed to harness Scream energy, and where I got ‘yeeted’ through that door, remember?”

Sora frowned unhappily, but didn’t fight his words. Riku and Chirithy popped out behind him, followed by the familiar banging of the door slamming shut and disintegrating before they could back out. The group trotted after Vanitas who had ploughed through a set of large double doors and wandered out onto the Scare Floor. The place was eerily silent without the hustle of monsters shuffling in and out of doors and the groaning of machinery whisking away the gateways only to slam down new ones in their place. Confetti and tinsel lay strewn across the floor and garlands were hung from every surface. Sora could sense the intention to incite a festive atmosphere, but the colours were dull and desaturated as if they were lacking the spark of life that he remembered.
“Are we revisiting all the places that we’ve both been to before?”

“I would imagine so,” Chirithy piped up, waddling down the corridor and struggling to keep up with its short legs. “You’re both asleep after all, so why wouldn’t you share the same dream?”

“It’s strange though,” Sora continued, putting his hand on his chin in thought. “When I was here, this whole place had been converted to the Laugh Floor. The monsters weren’t trying to frighten children, they were trying to make them laugh!”

The hall was suddenly bursting with colour, balloons shooting up from under desks and towards the ceiling and confetti raining down from above like colourful snowflakes. The machinery carrying the door frames suddenly churned to life, carrying gateways covered with stickers and crude children’s drawings like works of art in a museum. Laughter could be heard echoing down the halls from somewhere unseen.

“Huh,” Vanitas remarks, crossing his arms. “Guess we do remember this dump differently.”

“Yep, and that’s something I wanna ask you about,” Sora grinned with an evil twinkle in his eye. “You remember how my form changes to maintain the World Order?”

“You turned into a furry,” Vanitas stated with a deadpan look on his face. “I’m trying not to think about it. Why?”

“Welll…” Sora replied, sidling up to Vanitas with a coy look on his face. “What did you look like when you were here?”

Vanitas’ yellow eyes widened and he spluttered at the question thrust upon him from nowhere. A rosy blush spread across both cheeks and he turned his head away from Sora who had shuffled too close for comfort. That was not a conversation he was willing to have.

“None of your fucking business,” he spat, pushing Sora away from him as if his very presence was poisonous.

“Aww, c’mon! I won’t tell anyone.”

“Riku is literally right there.”

“I bet you were super fluffy just like I was, right?”

“I kept my motorcycle helmet on for a reason, you dolt!”

Riku’s eye was caught by the conveyor belt filing doors into the room without pause as a light-pink door covered with flower stickers slid into view. It was lowered into its receptacle and clamped into place, the red light embedded into the door frame turning on like a warning siren with a metallic click. Before he could open his mouth to warn his companions, the door harshly swung open and was almost torn off its hinges as a swarm of Unversed piled out of the threshold and onto the Scare Floor. The Flood scrambled over each other in an attempt to claw their way towards the fireworks of light that sparked from the chests of the Guardians of Light like beacons in the dark.

“More of them?!” Riku exclaimed, summoning Braveheart into his right hand and slicing through the building crowd of Flood like warm butter. “Where do they all keep coming from?”

Sora jumped in front of Chirithy and let loose a crackling Thundaga that disintegrated the Flood before him into a fine mist. Chirithy let out a high-pitched yelp and scampered off before the shadows could dig their sharp talons into its grey fur. The Dream Eater darted between Vanitas’ legs
and cowered behind him, wrapping its arms around his legs and trembling as the Flood continued their relentless approach. Vanitas felt a swell of confidence surge through his body at the sight of his minions – the Unversed were spawned from his own negative emotions and were subject to his every whim. The black-haired Keyblade wielder hadn’t missed the fact that no Unversed had reared their heads since the Door to Light chewed him up and spat him out, despite the countless examples of negative emotions he had endured at the hands of the Guardians of Light, but if he could regain control of his personal army then he would gain the upper hand.

“’Bout time you guys felt fit to show your faces again,” he grumbled at the twitching creatures. “You all have a lot to answer for.”

The Unversed didn’t react to Vanitas’ words at all, as if his voice was swallowed by the maelstrom of emotions that whirled under the skin of the monsters. Several Flood sunk into the ground and leached across the metal floor like a tide of indigo ink before resurfacing behind Vanitas. The frightened yelp that squeaked out of Chirithy was enough to alert the raven boy to the incoming assault and he quickly slew the Unversed with the Void Gear before they could land a single hit on him. Cannonballs of Dark Firaga exploded from his Keyblade and incinerated a path through the Flood as more continued to spill out of the door frame at an unstoppable rate.

Out of everyone in the room, out of all the hearts that were bursting with light… why did the Unversed choose to attack Vanitas?

“Look! The door!”

Chirithy pointed up at the conveyor belt of doors that continued their unrelenting march, drawing Vanitas’ attention to a heavy stone gateway inset with stained glass that seemed out of place next to the childish stickers and crayon scribbles that decorated the others. It was the same door that had brought them to Monstropolis! Maybe it could also be the way out? Sora and Riku had noticed the doorway’s arrival too and relented in their attempts to seal Boo’s door and stem the river of Flood that poured from it. Vanitas grabbed Chirithy by its cape and hauled ass towards the door as the machinery lowered it into place, clamping down around it and powering the red light as if it was the eye of some great beast. He almost tripped over the bunting that was still strewn around the floor, although he swore that some of the colour had drained back out of the decorations, returning them to the desaturated and lifeless state that he remembered them by.

Riku yanked the door open and ushered his friends inside before slamming it closed behind him. He swore that he could feel the razor-sharp claws of the Flood scraping against his exposed calves as the entryway snapped shut between them, coming inches from death at the hand of the Unversed. Footsteps echoed around the endless abyss of the Station of Awakening as the group were dropped back out into Sora’s dreamscape. The mural below their feet had reverted back to the image of the slumbering brunette, but he noticed that the dark fog of the void seemed awfully close to grazing their feet. Most of the other pillars now towered above their heads as if they had somehow descended within the Station of Awakening in their hasty retreat.

“Wow… we’re pretty far down now.”

“Yep,” Chirithy replied cheerily, as if it hadn’t just narrowly escaped its own demise. “Most people never make it this deep into the Station of Awakening. You’re a couple of levels away from being in a coma at this point.”

Sora didn’t know if the Dream Eater was being serious, but it continued to sway back and forth in contentment in response to the brunette’s expression of horror. Vanitas could feel the discontentment in his stomach building into a furnace of anger as his grasp on the situation continued to slip away from his fingers. It began with the sudden surges of exhaustion that washed over his limbs every time
he tried to use his powers. Then it progressed to having his memories meddled with until he wasn’t sure what side he was playing for. **Now** the Unversed weren’t even listening to him! It felt like every aspect of his personality was being stripped from him with every second that passed spent tied to Sora.

“What the hell is going on anymore?!” he yelled into the void as if praying that something would call back. “I can’t use my powers, I can’t use my Unversed, what’s even the point of all this!”

“Hey man, I thought you said you ‘don’t need the Unversed to get your way’,” Riku snarked back, curling his fingers in air quotes as he used the black-haired Keyblade wielder’s words against him. “I like it better this way anyway: you having control over the Unversed would just make you more dangerous.”

“Oh, give me a break,” Vanitas spat, his arms practically shaking with rage. “I’m so sick of everyone talking to me like I’m still a Seeker of Darkness! I’ve done nothing but follow along with your batshit schemes from the beginning and I deserve more respect!”

“You? *Respect*?!” Riku balked at his words before bursting into laughter. “Did you forget all those times you tried to murder everyone? Or are your memories just *that* messed up?”

Vanitas was contemplating whether it was worth throwing Riku off the side of the pillar and facing the consequences later, but Sora hurled himself between the two arguing boys before the situation could descend into fisticuffs. He pushed against both of their chests and shoved them apart with as much strength as he could muster, almost knocking the two to the floor despite them both outweighing him in pure muscle alone.

“Stop it, both of you!” Sora exploded. “You’re both acting like big babies! Pull yourselves together!”

“But Sora-” Riku tried to explain himself. He was unable to get more than two words out before the brunette completely cut him off.

“I’m talking to you too!” Sora cried as his heart threatened to burst out of his chest. “I’m sick of you treating Vanitas like he’s a danger to everyone he meets! I know he’s done some horrendous things, and he hasn’t done enough to prove that he deserves forgiveness for that, but he’s not a Seeker of Darkness anymore so stop treating him like one! Vanitas is trying harder than anyone else here and he deserves a second chance before condemning him!”

Riku opened his mouth to argue his stance, but the unfathomable betrayal pooling in Sora’s sapphire eyes immediately silenced any protests he could have mustered. He looked away in shame, unable to meet the gaze of the one he had journeyed to protect but had instead hurt more than anyone else. Before Vanitas could chime in with his own insults, he found himself on the receiving end of the brunette’s ire.

“And you!” Sora continued, jabbing a finger into Vanitas’ face. “I’m sick of you acting like everyone is out to fight you! Naminé and Ventus have been on your side from the beginning, not to mention that Terra and Kairi both admitted they were wrong about you. Heck, even *Roxas* was willing to give you a chance, and he never gives anyone second chances! You need to stop wallowing in your self-hatred and recognise that nobody will give you the respect you want until you show them that you deserve it!”

Vanitas was completely frozen in place, his eyes wide enough to bulge out of his head and both hands held up in the air in defense. Sora sighed, his shoulder drooping as if his outburst had released the building pressure from his frustration, and turned his eyes to the floor. The image of his slumbering face immortalised in the stained glass looked back at him, the eyes clenched in fitful sleep.
and Keyblade grasped firmly in his hand. The mosaic was a reminder of his inability to let go of his
own mistakes and how his failings continued to haunt him long after his heart should have moved
on. How could he possibly ask Vanitas and Riku to relieve themselves of their own misgivings if he
couldn’t do the same?

“I don’t expect the two of you to get along,” he mumbled, his passionate speech having drained
every ounce of energy from his exhausted heart. “I just want you both to recognise that spitting at
each other like this is only continuing the cycle of hate. I just want you both to let it go.”

Riku felt shame like he had never felt before. He couldn’t bear to bring his eyes up to gaze at the
defeated form of his best friend, knowing that his unprecedented rage was born from his own
prejudice. It was agonising to admit it, but Sora was right. Riku had allowed his preconception of
Vanitas’ character to get in the way of his mission like he was some inexperienced child, like he was
still the naïve boy that allowed darkness to stain his heart and guide him on a path of destruction.
There was a time when Riku was also undeserving of forgiveness, and Sora had still found the
strength of heart to redeem him of his sins and bring him back into the arms of those who still loved
him. The least he could do was to offer the same for someone who needed it even more.

“Vanitas, I- “

“I’m sorry,” Vanitas interrupted him, standing up straight and maintaining eye contact with every
word. “I’m sorry for taunting you when we first met on the beach, and I’m sorry for making things
so difficult when you’re just trying to help. I’ll do my best to work with you from now on.”

Sora and Riku exchanged identical surprised looks as Vanitas took the initiative and admitted his
own shortcomings. He expressed his failures with a calm expression on his face, his arms crossed
behind his back as if he was presenting a speech to an adoring audience. There was no sign of any
struggling in his heart as those humble words passed his lips, and no flickering of doubt in his
piercing yellow eyes.

“Wow… I wasn’t expecting you to be so honest,” Riku replied, his eyebrows raised in disbelief.
“I… appreciate your honesty.”

“Of course,” Vanitas stated, as if his admission was the most natural response to Sora’s outburst.
“I’m not above admitted when I’m wrong. Besides, I was the one who apologised first, and you
know what that means.”

Vanitas took a step forward and closed to gap between him and Riku. Sora made no move to leap
between the two, now content that they were not about to break out into a brawl if he didn’t
intervene. For a moment Riku was concerned that Vanitas was about to offer him a hug, until the
corners of his mouth turned up into a wicked smile and his eyes glimmer with enjoyment.

“That makes me better than you.”

Riku’s cyan eyes were sudden swamped with indignity as a red blush of anger crossed his cheeks
and tipped his ears. Vanitas looked ever so smug that he had gotten the upper hand over a Keyblade
Master and had gained the moral high ground, and it just made his face look all the more punchable.

“Oh yeah? Well I’m more sorry than you are, so there!”

“Oh, no no no. That’s not how it worked. I said it first.”

“Well I’m saying it louder!”
Sora looked on with a serene smile as Riku and Vanitas noisily debated who was the most apologetic. The two were becoming increasingly passionate to the point that their faces were almost touching, but he was satisfied that there was no need to jump in and forcibly separate them. The two Keyblade wielders had a lot more in common than either of them were willing to admit, and Sora couldn’t help but wonder if their similar personalities was the source of their feuding. Maybe they were just too alike to get along. Chirithy trotted up to him and tugged on the cuff of his plaid trousers, pulling the brunette down to its level so it could whisper in his ear.

“How did you know that would work?”

Sora muffled a laugh as Riku and Vanitas descended into threatening to beat each other up to prove who was the sorriest.

“I didn’t,” he admitted to the Dream Eater. “Sometimes you just gotta let your friends figure things out on their own, you know?”

Chirithy didn’t know, but Sora and his friends seemed to defy all logic and it was probably better left that way. The feuding had finally petered out and Vanitas and Riku seemed content to simply cross their arms and throw daggers at each other with their eyes. The two would likely never fully reconcile, but they had reached a mutual understanding that was leaps and bounds from where their relationship had begun. As Sora’s palm made contact with the strangely warm stone of the next door, he felt a pang of fear stab through his heart as if something unpleasant was waiting for him on the other side. He swallowed heavily and shoved the feeling to one side before pushing across the threshold.

Vanitas felt like his heart had finally returned home, and also like he was standing in a place he had never seen before.

The rippling waves reflected stunning golds and oranges from the setting sun that hovered in the sky above, kissing his skin with a gentle warmth like the touch of a long-lost lover. He could taste salt on the tip of his tongue and felt the breeze running its fingers through his jet-black hair. Vanitas was standing on a creaking wooden dock facing out across the ocean, but he could catch glimpses of vibrant greenery out of the corners of his eyes along with an endless white sandy beach. Fat, ripe coconuts dangled from the palm trees, just begging him to pluck them and harvest the white-gold milk that lay inside.

“Destiny Islands?” he asked the rolling waves. “Huh, it’s a lot nicer when the sun is up.”

“That’s right,” Riku remarked, appearing beside him and closing his cyan eyes as the familiar ocean breeze soothed his weary soul. “This is where Kairi kicked our collective asses when you dragged yourself out of the ocean like a zombie.”

“Man, I wish I could’ve seen it somehow,” Sora chuckled, jogging up to the pair. “Did you deserve it?”

“I think we both did,” Riku laughed, gently punching Sora’s shoulder in jest. He was followed by the sound of the door disintegrating behind him and Chirithy trotting up to the trio, its cape flowing in the breeze like scarlet silk as it sniffed the salty air in delight.

“Wow, you were lucky to grow up so close to the ocean!” it exclaimed. “But, weren’t we going through memories that the two of you share? Did you both grow up here?”

“Huh…” Vanitas remarked, crossing his arms. “I guess not….”
Vanitas felt the elation in his heart from the calming sight of the ocean quickly shatter into fragments of concern as the Dream Eater’s words pulled him away from the scene before him. The aching in his heart could only have arisen from a deep homesickness, but there was no reason for him to feel so attached to this place. Vanitas could almost imagine himself sitting on the crooked trunk of the Paopu tree alongside Riku and Kairi, planning excursions to the worlds that lay beyond the horizon without their parents to tell them what to do, but the memory seemed to slip through his fingers whenever he tried to pull it closer. He huffed to himself and turned away from the ocean before his mind became tangled up in the chain of memories that had woven itself around his heart.

Roxas was standing at the end of the dock.

“R-Roxas?” he stammered, startled by the sight of the blonde Nobody. “Are… you a dream?”

Roxas didn’t react to his words, his sky-blue eyes unfocused and glassy as if he was looking right through him. Neither his baggy pants nor his unruly blonde spikes moved with the breeze as if he was merely a phantasm. Vanitas was almost afraid to approach him for fear that the Nobody would morph into an Unversed and attack him, but Roxas seemed content to make the first move.

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

Vanitas cocked his head to one side in confusion as the groaning of the wood beneath his feet signaled the arrival of his companions to his side. For a moment Sora was equally surprised to see his Nobody so deep inside his dream, but after a brief moment of introspection he suddenly snapped his fingers in realization.

“Oh, I remember this!” he exclaimed, turning to Vanitas in excitement. “You gotta answer his question. For me, this was Selphie, Tidus, and Wakka. Geez, I don’t even remember what option I chose…”

Vanitas didn’t feel any more clued in on what was happening, but he saw Riku and Chirithy nodding in agreement so decided to trust his brother’s words. He contemplated the question for a moment, not expecting to face such an existential conundrum when he allowed the silver-haired Keyblade wielder into his sleeping heart. No matter which way he cut it, his heart kept returning to the same response.

“Being someone’s subordinate.”

The faraway look in Roxas’ eyes cleared like the sun peeking through dense storm clouds, and he offered Vanitas a warm smile. He had only ever received looks of malice and hatred from the blond before, so it was a little jarring to be given such a warm expression from one who despised him as much as Roxas did. Vanitas felt a deep, repressed part of his heart lurch to life as if invigorated by the friendship he craved.

“Is following orders really so bad?”

With that, Roxas faded into nothingness.

Vanitas threw Sora and Riku a confused glance, shrugging his shoulders heavily, and dropped down onto the beach below the pier with a gentle crunch. The pair exchanged a knowing look before following, Chirithy emitting a loud squeak as it almost face-planted the sand after dropping from such a disproportionate height. Riku couldn’t recall ever experiencing his own Dive Into the Heart, but he did recall this exact scenario. When he had plummeted into the depths of darkness to save Sora’s heart before Xehanort could implant his influence and crush his identity, he had gone through this exact sequence of events before the brunette had finally awoken from his coma. It was also when he found DiZ’s research piled up on the beach, kept safe from prying eyes and thieving fingers. If
Riku was correct in his deduction, then they must be close to reaching the end of Sora’s dream. This was their last chance to find a memory that would lead them to Sora’s body.

Vanitas felt the crunching of sand beneath his boots as he strolled across the waterfront, but he wasn’t able to go far before Ventus suddenly manifested before him. His brother appeared in the split second that he blinked, a similar wistful expression on his face that his identical twin had worn. Seeing the two so close together only highlighted the minor differences in their appearances – Ventus’ hair was a much lighter blond, and the sour expression that seemed to be permanently etched onto Roxas’ face created lines and shadows that were completely absent for the other half of his heart.

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

Vanitas felt a flood of questions welling at the back of his throat, but the distant look in Ventus’ eyes told him that he wouldn’t receive any answers. There was no doubt in his mind that this was not the real Ventus, rather it was a manifestation of his own memories of his brother. Or perhaps it was left over from his ten year stint in Sora’s heart. Either way, the only action he had available to him was to continue to push forward.

“Securing my freedom.”

“Is freedom such a big deal?” Ventus asked, but he disintegrated before Vanitas could offer a retort.

Sora started to break out into a jog to close the distance before Vanitas could slip away, but Chirithy held out a stumpy arm to stop him. He dug his heels into the sand and skid to a halt as the raven boy hopped up the steps towards the bridge leading up to the Paopu tree like he was on autopilot. He didn’t seem to know that the others were even still present, as if his whole heart was focused on completing his Dive and finalising his journey.

“Let him go on alone,” Chirithy stated with an uncharacteristic seriousness. “It’s important that he does this by himself.”

Sora was disappointed, but knew the Dream Eater was right. Riku watched those jet-black spikes disappear behind the crooked trunk of the tree before Vanitas hopped up onto the bark, sitting down next to Xion who was clad in her black leather trench coat. He had been praying that Naminé’s warning would not come true, that they would not find any interference from the other hearts that were once so intrinsically intertwined with Sora’s. He had even allowed himself to be hopeful when the only two destinations they were granted access to had nothing to do with Sora’s many Nobodies. It was clear to him now that some connection remained between Sora, Roxas, Ventus and Xion, otherwise they would not have appeared here in the deepest reaches of Sora’s dreamscape.

When Riku had first heard that Sora’s heart had been shredded and three pieces were stolen away into the night, his first thought had been of Roxas, Ventus and Xion. It hurt to even consider that those who Sora tended to in their darkest hours had inadvertently stolen from the boy who had granted them life. The small silver lining to the whole mess came from the knowledge that these connections were forged in steel long before Riku Dropped into the brunette’s dreams, so it was unlikely that the trio were responsible for Sora’s fractured heart.

Either that, or Sora’s heart had three pieces pilfered from it as early as the doomed Mark of Mastery. That was a line of thought that Riku wasn’t ready to even consider.

“Vanitas. What do you wish?”

Vanitas was surprised to see Xion in her old Organization XIII attire, but it wasn’t out of the realm of
possibility. This was how Vanitas had first met her, still a slave to Xemnas with no personality or
drive of her own. After spending time fighting alongside the Replica in Traverse Town and seeing
first-hand how Xion had grown from a mindless puppet into a fully-fledged individual gave him
hope that perhaps one day he could do the same. One day he could free himself of the chains that
tied him to Sora and Ventus, and he could figure out who ‘Vanitas’ was without them.

“I wish to start again.”

Xion gave him a sorrowful smile, but offered no words. Instead, she pointed out at the ocean with
one gloved hand, drawing his attention to a dirty glass bottle that bobbed in the waves. The
movement of the water was pushing the bottle towards the shore as if the sea itself was guiding it to
its final resting place on the crystalline sand. Xion vanished as Vanitas unceremoniously hopped off
the Paopu tree and sprinted back to the beach, eager to retrieve the decanter and hopefully uncover
the final piece of his puzzle. The foam from the waves pooled around the bottle, but neither Sora nor
Riku could bring themselves to touch it. Laying their hands on the glass flask felt like sacrilege, as if
the message encased within the jar was meant for Vanitas and Vanitas only. The black-haired
Keyblade wielder bent down on one knee, sinking into the wet sand that lay below him, and reached
out to claim his prize.

The bottle vanished before his fingertips could even graze the smudged glass. Vanitas flinched and
withdrew his hand as the clear blue waters turned a deep, inky black that crept up the shoreline and
stained the sand a cold charcoal-grey. The idyllic Destiny Islands warped and shifted until the four
were standing on the edge of the Realm of Darkness, the same shoreline that Vanitas had screamed
his lungs out, and where the Door to Light was forced into existence by the Kingdom Key. He stood
up to his full height and prepared to summon the Void Gear, expecting to see a small army of
Heartless tumbling over the horizon after sensing the gathering of hearts.

“Is there more Unversed coming?” Riku bellowed, frantically scanning the sands for the smallest
sign of movement. His mouth was as dry as the beach itself and his heart was pounding as he
prepared to protect his friends, but it wasn’t necessary. No Heartless or Unversed revealed
themselves, but that was because something much more powerful was yet to approach.

“Look! In the water!”

The four watched in terror as a figure breached the placid water, sending rivulets of black ink
running down either side of its body as it slowly walked up the beach towards them. It moved as if it
lacked the need to breathe, as if it could have lived an eternity beneath the waves without surfacing
for air. As it drew closer it became apparent that the figure was clad in black armour from head to
toe, with two golden-tipped wings protruding from the sides of the helmet. Its movements were stiff
and clumsy as if the metal armour was rusted from water damage, but it was clear that something was
alive inside its protective casing.

“Wait a minute,” Riku gasped, a look of horrified realisation crossing his face. “I’ve seen that armour
before!”

Before he could explain himself any further, the helmet emblazoned with the Dream Eater symbol
slid back to reveal the boy that lay beneath. It was Sora. His chocolate spikes were flattened from
the helmet and his eyes were closed in deep sleep, but it was undoubtedly Sora. But how, when Sora
himself stood on the sand alongside him? The Sora wearing Ventus’ armour did not open his eyes,
but moved his mouth as if talking in his sleep. The words he spoke did not come from the brunette
himself, but seemed to echo around the entire Realm of Darkness, repeating again and again in his
head until his own thoughts were drowned out beneath the overwhelming power of his heart.

“Your adventure begins at dawn. As long as the sun is shining, your journey should be a pleasant
Riku gasped and sucked in air as if his lungs were screaming, almost falling forward and out of his chair. His knuckles had turned white from the intense grip he had on his knees, and he could hear the rushing of blood through his veins as his heart continued to pound. Vanitas wailed in fear and threw himself off the bed, falling face-first onto the floor and getting tangled up in the silken bed sheets he had been sitting upon. The candlestick had almost completely burned down to the base, leaving a melted pool of wax dripping across the cabinet and threatening to spill onto the floor. Vanitas swore loudly. Riku wanted to reciprocate, but his tongue felt too large for his mouth.

Had he really been inside Sora’s dream for that long?

“Is everything OK?!” Naminé exclaimed, drawn to investigate by Vanitas’ screaming and bursting in through the door like a rampaging bull. She had half expected to find Vanitas and Riku engaged in yet another brawl and trying to knock each other out cold, so walking in to find Vanitas struggling on the floor while tangled up in bed sheets and Riku glued to his chair like his limbs had turned to concrete was not what she had imagined. She darted over to the struggling Seeker of Darkness and did her best to help untangle him from the piles of bed sheets that only seemed to become more knotted as he flailed around.

“What happened?” Naminé probed as Riku continued to sit in silence. “Are their hearts still all connected like I saw?”

Riku licked his lips and tried to calm his racing heart. He relaxed enough to pry his hands away from his knees while Vanitas gasped for air as his body was freed from the prison of linen. The raven boy lay on his back with both eyes closed, pressing the heel of his palms into his eye sockets and groaning in pain as his head continued to spin.

“Sort of,” Riku finally replied, his voice rasping as if it had gone unused for centuries. “I think we’ve located Sora’s body, though.”

“Oh thank God,” Naminé breathed a sigh of relief. Riku and Vanitas had been out for hours and she had become a nervous wreck just sitting and waiting for them to emerge from the clutches of sleep. “We need to tell Yen Sid as soon as possible so we can get a search party together. Where has it ended up?”

Naminé knew that Riku wasn’t the indomitable bastion of strength that he liked to portray himself as, but it was jarring to see the silver-haired Keyblade Master so shaken. He had dark bags under his eyes as if he hadn’t slept in days, despite having just roused from a deep slumber, and she could see the exhaustion wrapped around every limb. Whatever he had seen in Sora’s dreams, whether it was related to the brunette’s Nobodies or not, it must’ve been bad to have disturbed Riku to such an extent.

“Naminé… Sora’s body. It’s on that beach. That same beach where everything seems to end up.”

“You mean the one on Destiny Islands?” she probed, unsure as to what Riku was attempting to imply with such a vague statement.

“No,” Riku insisted with a deep-seated seriousness that dug into her bones and turned her blood to ice. “It’s on that beach. It’s in the Realm of Darkness.”
This chapter took an ungodly amount of time to write. Turns out having the brilliant idea for a character (can you consider a Keyblade to be a character?) to speak in old English requires researching old English! Who knew!!!

Aqua had played through so many scenarios in her head that she was losing count. She could see Vanitas preying upon Kairi's relative inexperience in battle and overpowering the girls while Aqua wasn't there to stop him. She could see Vanitas abusing Ventus' trusting nature and striking while Aqua wasn't there to jump in and take the blow. She imagined Vanitas using Donald and Goofy's forgiving dispositions to slip away into the narrow alleyways of Thebes before anyone even knew he was gone. She could see him attacking her friends over and over in her head, and it was all because she wasn't there to defend them.

It was no secret that Aqua held the most personal grudge against Vanitas, far outweighing any of the other Guardians of Light. Roxas was severely distrusting of the black-haired boy: he knew how it felt to have his entire existence tethered to someone else, yet chose a very different path. Riku wanted to make Vanitas repent for all the pain and suffering he had inflicted upon Sora, and he planned to do it with his fists. Terra despised him for trying to take Ventus away from him mere moments after the blond had finally roused from his decade-long slumber. But Aqua…

Aqua resented Vanitas because he represented every way that she had failed. He was a living manifestation of her inability to protect Ventus at his weakest. Of her failure to prevent the Seeker of Darkness from forcibly merging with his brother to bring about the destruction of all worlds with $\chi$-blade in hand. He was an illustration of the allure of darkness that claimed Terra's heart and left him unrecognisable as his identity was swept away in the pursuit of power. He was proof that Sora could dive into the depths of darkness to save her heart as many times as he liked, yet she would never be able to pay him back.

Aqua looked at Vanitas, and all she saw was one million reasons why she had failed as a Keyblade Master, and as a friend.

She had lived through every scenario that her heart could imagine. The only one she hadn't considered was one in which every Guardian of Light returned singing Vanitas' praises.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you this stressed out, Aqua.”

Aqua paused her anxious pacing before she burned a hole through Yen Sid’s carpet and tried to relax her shoulders. She had barely sat down since this whole debacle started - her Keyblade-hand ready to subdue the Seeker of Darkness if he went rogue. It hardly took any time at all to jump on her Glider and high-tail it over to the Mysterious Tower when she received her summons. Ventus and Terra had tagged along, afraid that the blunette would spear Vanitas in the head before he had a chance to open his mouth. Aqua would've given anything to have stood guard while Riku Dropped into Sora's dreams, but she knew she could trust a fellow Keyblade Master. If anyone could knock some sense into Vanitas, it was him.

"I don't understand why Vanitas was allowed to travel around without at least one Keyblade Master
at his side,” Aqua stated, her expression icy-cold. "I know you want to trust him, Mickey, but this seems unreasonably dangerous."

Aqua was initially ecstatic to see King Mickey finally out of the castle again after shutting himself away with his books in his unending quest to rescue Sora. She had been fraught with distress at the thought of the mouse withering away in a prison of his own making, and the blunette suspected that Minnie was worried about that too. It had been months since she saw him filled with such vigour, but it was a shame that it had to be under such terse circumstances.

“Gosh, I know…” Mickey agreed sadly, perched on Yen Sid’s desk in an attempt to remain at the taller Keyblade wielder’s eye-level. “I wasn’t sure about it either, but you know, it’s not just the locations to which Sora’s memories are tied. It’s the people! The more friendly faces he sees, the stronger his heart will become!”

Aqua knew he was right, but her heart still soured at the mouse’s words. Surely it wouldn’t have been that intrusive to have one of the three Keyblade wielders at their disposal tag along. This was what she trained for; what she had grown callouses on her palms and blisters on her feet for. The memory of Ventus accusing her of abusing her position as Keyblade Master flickered to mind but banished it before her heart could falter. She was once a mockery of a Master, and this could've been her chance to redeem herself.

“Besides,” Terra interjected, putting one hand on Aqua’s shoulder in solidarity. “Sora wouldn’t have remembered anything if you hung around making scary eyes at Vanitas all day.”

“Excuse me, he deserves it,” she recoiled in offence. “Have you gone soft?”

“Eh, maybe a little,” Terra shrugged with a smile twinkling in his eyes. “I guess all that time spent under Xehanort’s control has given me a little more appreciation for what Vanitas went through.”

Aqua hadn't been overly surprised when Kairi and Xion reported that their mission to the ruins of Traverse Town had been successful. Vanitas was a foul individual, but he wasn't stupid. If he had attempted to abscond while the girls’ backs were turned only to be recaptured, it would have only proved that he was inherently untrustworthy. The Guardians of Light would've immediately doubled down on the chains around his ankles, and Vanitas would kiss goodbye to any chance at regaining their trust. Kairi and Xion were steadfast in their description of the events that occurred in the pitiful remains of the town. Vanitas was intrinsically uncooperative and cared little for those around him, yet when the opportunity arose for the black-haired Keyblade wielder to leave them to their fate at the hands of the Heartless…

He didn’t.

Sora refused to divulge how much of a hand he had in that decision, and Aqua suspected she knew why. Without knowing which of the duo forced Vanitas back to the fight before Kairi and Xion were overwhelmed, they had to consider that Vanitas himself was behind the uncharacteristic decision. That he had seen their hopeless situation and had drawn his Keyblade to save the lives of those he once called enemies. Aqua was deeply unhappy that Sora would attempt to manipulate them like that, but it had worked. It didn’t shock her that Kairi and Xion would be willing to offer an olive branch after such a manoeuvre. It did shock her that Donald and Goofy suddenly changed their tune and began to sing his praises after their traipse through Olympus.

Aqua could reason all of that away, but the one concerning her the most was Terra. If there was anyone she could rely on to have her back regarding the Seeker of Darkness, it was him. Listening to the brunette recount how Vanitas’ expression had shifted to one of mournful longing at the sight of the mad scientist’s artificial heart had shaken her resolve. Within less than a week, Aqua found
herself demoted from leader of their ramshackle pack to residing in the vast minority. Either Vanitas had become a master manipulator, or there was truth to their words. Aqua wasn’t sure which was worse.

“Do… you really think he’s changed?”

“What?! Of course not!” Ventus exclaimed, leaping into the air with passion. “Vanitas is just as much of a butt as he always was!”

"Then, why?" Aqua replied, feeling her confusion continue to deepen. Ventus' heart was so eager to see the light in the darkness that he was willing to overlook the red flags along the way, but Vanitas was the factory where those red flags were made for crying out loud! The blond was impossibly naïve, but he still had a keen sense of right and wrong. Aqua couldn't fathom what had relieved him of his common sense.

"Because that's not the point," Ventus continued firmly. "Vanitas is never going to change who he is. The person we knew before was fed false promises by Xehanort; promises that he could end the pain Vanitas endured whenever an Unversed was created or destroyed, even though Xehanort was the cause of all that pain from the beginning! Vanitas didn’t have anyone to save him from the darkness. I can’t even begin to imagine what I would have done in that situation, had Sora not been there to rescue me."

Aqua winced at Ventus' agitated tone but didn't attempt to stop him before he got too worked up. His words conjured an image in her mind – a portrait of a girl with cobalt-blue hair and torn clothes who stumbled despondently through the Realm of Darkness, waiting for ten long years for someone to find her before she succumbed to the intoxicating call of darkness. Ventus had someone to carry his ailing heart to safety when he needed it most, but Aqua knew how to felt to scream into the abyss, aware that no one would call back. She knew how it felt to cling to the last of her sanity with her fingertips, how it felt to watch the faces of her friends become more and more faded as time seemed to slow to a crawl.

Yeah, she supposed she could relate to Vanitas in that regard.

“This is the first time that Vanitas has been free of Xehanort’s control. It’s the first time that he’s existed as his own person, instead of just someone’s clone. Sure, he might not be a very nice person, but he’s still a person! After everything that Xehanort put him through… doesn’t he at least deserve a chance to exist?”

Aqua wished that Ventus would take some of that passion and apply it to his studies, but she couldn't argue with the boy who had become her baby brother. The zeal in his sky-blue eyes was so alien on his soft features that it almost made her chuckle. Ventus might have spent ten years in a deep slumber, but the blunette could tell that the passage of time was causing him to blossom into a mature young man. It was a shame that she couldn't have been there to witness it alongside him. There was so much time that the two would never be able to get back.

“Alright, I guess that’s fair enough,” Aqua smiled, feeling the shard of ice in her heart melt in the presence of Ventus’ overwhelming light. “If blockhead Terra can be open-minded enough to give Vanitas a second chance, then I suppose I can too.”

“Excuse me, I’m standing right here,” Terra remarked with fake indignation.

“You’re not denying it, though.”

Terra smirked and shrugged his shoulders without voicing any complaints. How could he deny
something that everyone knew to be true anyway? It almost felt like the three were reliving the old
days when the cruel universe had yet to tear them apart and scatter their hearts to the fickle winds of
fate. When they would lie under the night sky and wonder about the countless worlds that twinkled
above them like stars unlike Master Eraqus dragged them back inside. Those days were long gone,
but there were many days ahead of them.

Vanitas threw open the heavy wooden doors and marched into the room, saw who was waiting for
him, and marched right back out.

“Not a chance, buddy,” Riku stated, holding his arm out and blocking the door frame with his entire
body. “Get your ass in there.”

Vanitas shot him an intense stare like he wished Riku would drop dead on the spot, but their
newfound understanding of each other meant that Riku didn't even flinch. Vanitas shoved his hands
into his pockets and trundled into the room with a sour look on his face. The dark bags under his
eyes were only deepened by his scowl as if he had two black eyes, betraying the restlessness of his
first night's sleep. He couldn't say he was in any hurry to try that again. The bitter expression on his
face slid away to reveal the suspicion that lay beneath as his exhausted brain finally registered the
implications of the sight that greeted him.

“Three Keyblade Masters?” he questioned, his eyes flicking between Aqua, Mickey, and Riku.
“You have three Masters, and you can't give the title to Sora? That's fucked up.”

“I don’t think you’re the best judge of that,” Aqua snorted, fighting against the urge to sock the raven
boy in the face for his impudence. Every instinct she possessed was screaming at her to attack the
Seeker of Darkness, but she clung to the hope that had spilt from Ventus’ mouth. Her desire to see
the spark of light that the others had witnessed within Vanitas’ shrivelled heart far outweighed her
craving for vengeance.

“That’s fair,” Vanitas stated in a rare moment of agreement. “Are we taking the entire circus to the
Realm of Darkness, then?”

He gestured at the gaggle of Keyblade Wielders that had crammed themselves into Yen Sid's office.
Vanitas fantasised about descending upon the unsuspecting Heartless and crushing anything that
stood between him and Sora, but he needed more personal space than the large troop would permit.
Besides, he could only tolerate so many speeches about the POWER OF FRIENDSHIP™ in one
day.

"Not quite," Yen Sid replied, as formidable as ever despite the spark of amusement in his eyes. The
wizard's expression softened as his gaze shifted over to Terra and Ventus. "I'm sorry to ask this of
you, but could you kindly allow us a moment with Vanitas. We Masters will take it from here."

Ventus started to argue that he had every right to learn what had become of his little brother, but
Terra snapped a hand over his mouth before the blond could stick his foot in it. Yen Sid may have
posed his statement as a request, but it was more of a command. He shot the group a meek smile and
all but dragged Ventus out of the room as he tried to wriggle out of the stronger Keyblade wielder's
grip. It was only when the doors slammed shut after them that Aqua let out the breath that she hadn't
realised she'd been holding.

“Alright, let’s get this show on the road,” Mickey stated, hopping down from Yen Sid’s desk yet
standing with as much confidence as those who now towered above him. “Not only are we all
Keyblade Masters – barring Vanitas, of course – the three of us are the most familiar with the Realm
of Darkness.”
"... So, this is the 'Dream Team', huh?"

Vanitas had half expected the gathering of the four remaining Keyblade Masters to be an assassination attempt, but he remembered how Sora's words stung. He was perfectly aware that he reacted to the presence of everyone that wasn't Ventus with unrestrained aggression but figured it was better to make the first move rather than let anyone stab him in the back later. Regardless, if Riku could pull his finger out of his ass and stop treating him like a felon, then he supposed he owed him the same. Cooperating with the Guardians of Light left a bad taste in his mouth, but it was a hell of a lot better than sitting on that damned beach twiddling his thumbs for all eternity.

"In a sense, yes," Yen Sid agreed, his voice slow and deliberate. "It was not only your status as Keyblade Masters that brought you before me today. If the events witnessed by Riku during his Drop into Sora's heart reflect the truth, then Ventus' heart is still protecting Sora with his armour."

"I've seen this before," Riku explained to Vanitas, who had mouthed a silent "what?!" at the bizarre explanation. "When Xehanort tried to take over Sora's heart, I Dropped into his dream to halt the spread of darkness before it was too late. He was clad in Ventus' armour then too, and he attacked me."

“That's what we’re afraid of,” Mickey confirmed, his thin tail swishing in thinly-veiled concern. “It’s possible that Ventus’ armour will see us as a threat and attack us too. If it comes to it, we may need to fight Sora and take him out before we can bring him home. That’s the second reason why we were chosen – whoever is going on this mission must be willing to attack the very person we've endeavoured to save."

Riku and Aqua shared identical grimaces at the revelation. Riku had been choking down a sensation of dread ever since that rusted armour dragged itself from the ocean like a zombie, but he was clinging to the glimmer of hope that remained alight in his heart. The relief he felt knowing that Sora was within reaching distance was immeasurable, but the dismay at having to raise his Keyblade against his best friend for the umpteenth time was even greater. Aqua's heart was awash with grief and guilt that rolled over her in waves whenever the blunette recalled lashing out at Sora; her heart consumed with despair and desperate to take it out on anyone she could. The job of a Keyblade Master was never glamorous, but she loathed the concept of facing the innocent brunette in combat again.

“Oh, that’s not as bad as I expected,” Vanitas stated, waving his hand dismissively. “Everyone here has fought Sora at least once anyway, so this is just another day at the office.”

“Please don’t say it so callously,” Aqua groaned. “I’m trying not to think about that.”

“Damn, well at least Ventus is finally paying Sora back for the ten years of rent he owes. Seriously though, does everything end up on that beach?!” Vanitas spurted out, his inner machinations given voice before he could stay his tongue.

“It sure does seem that way!” Mickey chuckled at the incensed look on Vanitas’ face. “It’s the same spot that the Door to Darkness and the Door to Light lead to, and it’s where Sora, ahem… ‘rescued’ Aqua from the darkness in her heart. The Dark Margin is a very significant location. I can’t believe I didn’t think of checking there myself!”

Aqua noted the King’s choice of words and how he tiptoed around the fact that she had almost succumbed to the allure of darkness. She had once spent many nights wondering how Terra could have allowed the shadows in his heart to rise up and almost swallow him whole. It was only now that she had nearly lost herself in the same manner that she understood why one would give in to the numbing abyss.
"But how do we get there?" Aqua probed. "Surely we don't have enough time to summon the Door to Darkness again…"

"Ahem," Vanitas coughed loudly, cutting across Mickey before he could answer. "I may not be one of Xehanort's lackeys any more, but I'm still a being of pure darkness. I'll just whip us up a Corridor real quick, and we'll be back home before you can lecture me on the power of friendship again!"

"A Corridor of Darkness…" Yen Sid mused, eyes closed in thought. "Hmm… that would certainly be the most direct course of action. But Vanitas, are you still able to summon such a path? That ability only belongs to those who have fully given their hearts over to darkness…"

"Umm, has your old age finally caught up with you, gramps?!" Vanitas spat, anger swelling up in his chest the wizard's harsh words dented his pride. "No one doubts my abilities and gets away with it!"

Riku briefly considered stepping in and snipping Vanitas' rage in the bud before he hurt himself, but the knowing smile on Yen Sid's face as the black-haired Keyblade wielder shot steam out of his ears told him otherwise. Perhaps the wizard understood what it took to get Vanitas motivated more than Riku gave him credit for. The silver-haired boy had enough control over the darkness in his heart to muster up a Corridor if necessary, but Vanitas had taken the statement so personally that offering to help would've just ended with a fist in his mouth.

Vanitas funnelled his mounting anger into his fists, clenching them until his leather gloves threatened to tear at the seams with the strain. He squeezed his yellow eyes shut, recalling how it felt to hear the charcoal sand crunching beneath his boots and the inky waves lapping at his ankles. How it felt to dig the teeth of his Keyblade into the unforgiving sand and scream in fury as the Door to Light refused to reveal itself. How it felt to entwine his fingers in his hair and stare up at the pale light of Kingdom Hearts, praying for the faintest glimmer of a stray heart fleeting down to earth so he could fill the chasm in his chest. Vanitas growled as the unpleasant memories washed over him, but the image of that cursed beach was now crystalline in his mind.

With his entire being focused on the murky grey shore, Vanitas reopened his eyes and thrust his hands forward, palms out and fingers spread as if casting a spell. He could practically smell the dank, musty scent of darkness tickling his nostrils as his powers wrenched the shadows under his control. Vanitas tensed his shoulders and braced his knees and pushed with everything he had.

Nothing happened.

"Oh for FUCKS SAKE! GODDAMN PIECE OF SHIT!"

"A-Are you sure you don’t just want me to summon a Corridor instead?" Riku asked nervously. Vanitas looked like he was about to explode, and it wasn’t just from the effort he was exerting.

"You stay over there and keep your damned mouth shut," Vanitas growled, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. "Every time I try to use my powers, they fail on me. I refuse to let this get the best of me."

Riku very wisely decided to follow Vanitas’ orders. He hadn’t intended to use such a harsh tone, but the maelstrom raging in his heart had grown too large to conceal. Vanitas was familiar with the concept of anger, but this was the first time he felt angry with himself. Every second spent with Sora attached to his heart like a conjoined twin was another second that his powers dulled. Another second that the impenetrable darkness that formed his heart faded from a majestic inky black to a pathetic dull grey. The darkness was all he had: it was there when he was first torn from Ventus' heart, when he was slain by the malformed $\chi$-blade within the ruins of his brother's Station of
Awakening. Many loathed the unforgiving abyss of darkness, but to Vanitas it was a safety blanket of numbness that muted the stabs of pain from his Unversed, even if just for a moment. There was nowhere to hide in the light, no respite from the pain and no refuge from his self-loathing.

Vanitas was stronger than this. He was too powerful to allow his single source of safety to slip away into the dead of night. The darkness was his to control, and it would obey him.

As if sensing his sudden surge of resolve, a Corridor of Darkness spluttered into existence before him, the rivers of darkness undulating through the air like a seamstress weaving the most fragile silk. Vanitas could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as crackling energy spewed from the portal, filling the air with sparks of light and the taste of iron. It was malevolent, dangerous, and ever so beautiful.

“Fucking finally!” Vanitas yelled and jumped headfirst into the Corridor.

“Come on, can we please try to stick together?” Aqua pleaded as the portal swallowed the black-haired Keyblade wielder whole. She groaned in exasperation as Vanitas vanished into the swirling depths of the Corridor of Darkness and threw Riku an exhausted look before hopping in after him. Vanitas really did draw his motivation from the strangest places.

Riku felt the familiar pulses of energy graze his skin as the portal began to lose power and slowly dissipate into its surroundings. He was loathed to answer the call of darkness, but it was so sickly sweet to his ears that he could barely resist a taste. He stepped forward and almost allowed the Corridor of Darkness to sweep his form away like it had done so many times before, but stopped in his tracks and turned to face Mickey with a piercing seriousness.

“Mickey,” Riku stated flatly, the Corridor of Darkness swirling behind him and framing his silver locks like a royal purple halo. “I can tell when you’re keeping things from me. You’re far too clued into this situation than you have any right to be.”

Mickey felt his heart drop into his stomach and opened his mouth to protest his innocence, but the steely look in Riku’s eyes silenced the words before they could pass his lips. Perhaps it was the length of time they had spent training together to bring the darkness in the silver-haired boy’s heart under control before it consumed him. Perhaps it was because Riku was forced to grow up far quicker than any child should. There was a maturity to his cyan eyes that betrayed the soul that lay beneath, battered by the forces of darkness that had tempted him and yet still standing tall. There was a reason why he was chosen to ascend to the rank of Keyblade Master over Sora, who was arguably the more powerful of the two.

“There’s really no getting anything past you anymore…” Mickey sighed, shaking his head in disbelief. Riku’s icy-cold expression didn’t flicker even once. “Tell you what. I promise that when we get back, I’ll explain everything I know.”

“And Sora? Vanitas?” Riku pressed, his heart swelling with doubt at the King’s words.

“Especially Sora and Vanitas,” Mickey swore with a weightiness that was almost comical on his cartoonish features. “After everything they’ve been through, they deserve to know the whole story more than anyone else. I know that my word may not hold the power it used it, but it’s all I can offer.”

Riku studied Mickey’s eyes for the slightest hint of deception, searching for a sign that the monarch was misleading him or attempting to defer his attention elsewhere. He had been at the receiving end of so many of the mouse’s empty promises. So many oaths sworn and vows taken with nothing to show for it. Instead, he only found an unbreakable resolve like a cast iron suit of armour, refusing to
yield under his scrutiny. The two had spent far too long together for Mickey to pull the wool over his eyes anymore, but the King was always an open book just begging to share its secrets. He couldn't recall a time where his emotions were so tricky to decipher, buried so deep that his true intentions were shrouded in mystery.

For the first time since the two had met, Riku felt like he was in the presence of royalty. “OK.”

Mickey breathed a heavy sigh of relief at Riku’s acceptance, his unbreakable shield lowered to allow his usual laidback demeanour to take over once more. Riku would never understand that damned mouse, but there was someone else who needed his attention more. He turned his back on the King and permitted the arms of the portal to absorb him, his silver locks reflecting a metallic purple in the eerie light of the portal. Mickey felt as if the weight of the world was suddenly bearing down on his shoulders, dragging him into the ground where he stood and fixing him in place. He glanced at Yen Sid who had watched their exchange in ponderous silence; the wizard remained seated at his desk with a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Does Minnie still wish for children?”

Mickey groaned and leapt through the Corridor to Darkness without responding, the portal spluttering into nothingness behind him.

Yen Sid slowly leaned back in his chair, the creaking of the aged wood overpowered only by that of his arthritic spine. Every minute spent in the presence of the rambunctious Guardians of Light took years off the wizard’s lifespan, yet the hushed stillness that followed in their absence left him with a feeling of solitude. Had he only been a few centuries younger, he would’ve mourned the loss of his precious peace and quiet, but he was growing fonder of the spark of life that they brought to his lonely tower. His enchanted brooms and candlesticks couldn’t hold a conversation, couldn’t keep his mind active and his wit sharp. He just wished that the Guardians of Light wouldn’t accidentally break his stuff so often.

Rubbing his snow-white beard in thought, Yen Sid grasped his quill in his right hand, carved from the blackest feather shed by Maleficent’s raven, and gently dipped the sharp tip into his inkwell. He had a lot of letters to write, and he doubted the four would be back from their sojourn in the Realm of Darkness any time soon. The wizard unfurled a nearby parchment, stained a warm brown from the last time he spilt his tea on his desk, and put the quill to paper.

He just hoped the Ventus, Roxas, and Xion would take the news well.

Considering how Vanitas loudly proclaimed his connection to the forces of darkness to anyone who would listen, he had spent very little time in the Realm of Darkness itself. On the few occasions that he returned to his primordial state as a faint, formless shade after suffering a defeat – and he would insist that had happened very few times – he could only ever recall a deep, dreamless sleep that stretched on seemingly without end. He was inevitably plopped back into the Realm of Light whenever someone called upon him, usually Xehanort or one of his insufferable fan club members. His entire impression of the domain was built around the Dark Margin and its dreary waters, so Vanitas was expecting the rest of the Realm of Darkness to be similar in disposition. He wouldn’t have been surprised to stumble upon an infinite expanse of inky-black ocean or even a similarly-sized sea of ravenous Heartless with nothing else beyond the horizon.
What Vanitas wasn’t expecting was to find himself lost in the winding streets of a quaint abandoned town.

“Whatops. Guess my aim was a little off.”

The backwater dump he found himself in this time made the perpetual construction site that was Radiant Garden look like an idyllic paradise. The path before him coiled between buildings like a serpent, spewing burgundy bricks in every direction as if something had rampaged through the streets and tore up everything in its path. The buildings were barely clinging to their skeletons, shingles slipping from roofs and crashing to the ground before scattering into silver dust. Vanitas glanced up at the sky, expecting to see the pale blue light of Kingdom Hearts glaring down at him. Instead, he discovered angry storm clouds that swaddled the town and threatened to burst and unleash their captive water at any moment.

“This place brings back a lot of dark memories,” Aqua mused quietly as if the buildings would collapse if she spoke too loud. “It’s such a shame. It used to be so beautiful.”

"Huh…” Riku pondered, kicking up a loose brick only to reveal another beneath as if the foundation of the road continued down into eternity below them. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this place before.”

“I feel like I might have,” said Vanitas, “but my memories aren’t exactly reliable these days.”

“Well, if there’s one thing we can rely on, it’s your heart!” Mickey exclaimed, his cheery attitude undeterred by the miserable surroundings. “The brightest light shines in the deepest darkness. Just follow your heart, and it'll guide us straight to Sora!”

Vanitas flinched as the King’s statement sunk into his skin and awakening a part of his heart that he refused to acknowledge. He wondered if Mickey knew that he was repeating the philosophy shared by Hercules almost word for word. He threw a worried glance down the cobbled path, anticipating a tidal wave of Heartless spilling out from around the corner at any moment. Only the sound of crunching dirt beneath his feet accompanied his anxiety. He hadn’t expected to witness such vibrant colours from a world lost in the Realm of Darkness. Instead of the drab greys and purples of the shoreline, green shrubbery and golden lanterns tantalised his vision like beacons in the night. Even the buildings seemed to shimmer and morph before his eyes like reflections of memories lost to the annals of time. Creepy.

“Alright, let’s get moving,” Aqua stated firmly, stepping into the role of Keyblade Master and taking the lead. “Just keep your ears peeled for the sound of a clock chiming. The layout of this place can change with little notice, and we don’t want to be caught up in it when it happens.”

Vanitas loathed the idea of following orders from the stuck-up blunette, but the firmness in her voice convinced him to fall in line without question. Aqua was clearly more familiar with the hazardous grounds they had found themselves in, and Vanitas didn’t fancy rejecting advice that could keep him alive. The group trotted down the cobbled road, their stance unsteady as they came close to tripping over the loose bricks that jutted from the ground. The black-haired Keyblade wielder could hear quiet laughter pealing down the uninhabited sidestreets accompanied by the smell of freshly cut flowers, but every path they crossed was unnervingly devoid of life. His mind cast back to the skeleton of Traverse Town that withered away in the Realm of Light, but this village was somehow more vibrant and alive than that hellhole could ever hope to be. Vanitas could almost envision the shadows of people walking down these streets and filling them with noise.

The party stopped in their tracks as the sound of rickety wheels clattering over paving stones resonated through the air.
Vanitas felt a single bead of sweat run down his forehead. His right hand flexed as if the hilt of the Void Gear was resting in his palm and ready to strike. Riku ducked down and prepared to launch at anything foolish enough to approach, but the commotion mercifully moved away from the group and vanished into the depths of the town. Whether they had gone entirely unnoticed or were deliberately avoided, the source of the ruckus had missed them by a narrow margin. There were no Heartless alive that could best the might of four Keyblade Masters and one… whatever Vanitas was, but they were fighting on the monsters’ home turf. Overconfidence would be the delivered of their demise. It was safer to interpret even the smallest sounds as a sign of an incoming attack, rather than allow a potential threat to strike while their attention was elsewhere.

“Let’s get out of here before that comes back.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice,” Vanitas replied hurriedly, increasing the urgency with which he picked his way down the street. As they progressed deeper into the town, the road seemed to deteriorate before their eyes, large holes now dotted across their path and plummeting into an endless void of black. The gloomy touch of darkness was corrosive to those exposed to it for longer than their bodies could handle, so the town must’ve been consumed many years before exist in such a decrepit state. What a waste. Vanitas’ ears occasionally picked up the rumbling of wheels as their unseen stalker continued its patrol throughout the village, but the apprehensive flickering of his eyes failed to pick up any sign of its identity. Perhaps the Realm of Darkness was just getting to his head.

“Welp, there it is. It’s a terrible shame that the castle has ended up in such a state.”

Vanitas almost tripped over Mickey, who had paused in their prowling to take in the change of scenery. His attention had been so laser-focused on evading their assailant that he hadn’t noticed how the path opened up before them. No longer were they trapped on either side by rickety buildings, but instead faced a slender bridge on the verge of collapse. A glance over the edge revealed a thick forest of vines adorned with blood-red thorns hungering for something to topple from the overpass and meet their fate in the spikes below. His head swam with vertigo, and he averted his gaze before he fertilised the soil below him with his body. His eyes finally rested upon the vision that had brought the King to a halt: a glorious white palace reaching up to the heavens with the tallest alabaster tower top-

“Please don’t tell me that you’re spying on her now?!”

Vanitas’ could feel agitated vibrations resonating throughout his chest as a deep growl ripped its way from his throat. The snow-brushed peak of the mountain had numbed everything from the knees down, and he was not in the mood for Larxene’s mind games. His islander disposition was better suited for the gentle salty breeze and the warm caress of the sun, not for the inhospitable icy tundra that the natives of Arendelle called home. He was decidedly miserable, and the snooty smirk on Larxene’s face was only deepening his frustration. Oh, what he wouldn’t give for his own thick trench coat to stave off the chilling touch of the icy wasteland that had sunk its fingers into his bones.

“Don’t turn this around on us!” Vanitas spat back, hearing the crunching of snow as Donald and Goofy prepared to defend themselves against the blonde Seeker of Darkness. “You’re following her!”

Larxene’s grin widened menacingly at Vanitas’ retort, raising a single platinum eyebrow and snorting in amusement. Her twin cowlicks rippled in the mountain breeze like an insects antennae and her trench coat was her black chitinous armour. She was a cockroach against the pristine white snow, one that Vanitas longed to crush beneath his boots.
“Ooh, look at you get all sassy!” she chuckled, her once ivy-green eyes now turned a sickly yellow. “OK, I'll admit Elsa is a person of interest to us. Maybe she's one of the seven pure lights we need – the New Seven Hearts.”

Vanitas felt his heart skip a beat at Larxene’s explanation, voiced with a causal tone despite the weight of her words. The Princesses of Heart were not tools to be used or treasures to be coveted. They were far more than the mindless utensils that the Real Organization XIII made them out to be. Listening to the blonde Nobody diminish their entire existence down to the power they had inherited really rubbed him the wrong way. The original Organisation once viewed Vanitas in a similar manner, believing that his Keyblade could be manipulated into slaying the Heartless and bolstering their artificial Kingdom Hearts with the darkness that it released. Xehanort hadn’t learned a thing.

“Fortunately, we’re in the best position to tell,” Larxene continued, revelling in the seething anger that wormed its way across Vanitas’ features. “Can’t pick out that special glimmer unless you’re standing in the shadows.”

Larxene turned her back on the trio and craned her neck upwards to gaze upon the majesty of Elsa's ice palace. What an impressive specimen, to be the container for such unbelievable magic yet choose to lock it away. Elsa could've been Queen of much more than just Arendelle if she had only been willing to use her powers to subjugate those who opposed her. Instead, she chose to disguise her potential like she had something to fear from the very thing that made her unique. Such a talent was wasted on her.

“And maybe Elsa doesn’t have it,” Larxene mused, raising one hand as lucid snowflakes glazed her glove to reflect a delicate rainbow of light. “I mean, just look how icy her palace is, made of magic she forced herself to keep hidden until now... What if it’s DARK magic?”

“Else would never rely on the darkness!”

Larxene had no idea how Sora had survived as long as he had with such a brazen attitude. She yearned to strike him down and leave only a red smear in the snow as proof that he had ever walked the earth, but Xehanort would have her head if she dared touched a hair on his scalp. The old man was besotted with the notion of facing his mortal enemy in a final climactic battle that he was striving to keep Sora alive. Xehanort couldn't bear the thought of anyone else bringing Sora to his knees.

“Actually, it's still too early to call,” the blonde Nobody admitted. Vanitas’ iron-clad expression momentarily fractured in shock at her confession. “Depends on how she sees it. If she believes her magic is darkness, that’s what it’ll become. Accepting her power, whatever it is, is the only way she can set her heart free.”

Vanitas’ eyes were drawn up to the spiralling peaks of the glacial palace. The Organization was well versed in deception, twisting their words and shrouding their intentions behind imperceptible lies. Could the same vile shadows that birthed the Heartless also create such a flawless palace of ice? Could it sincerely bring a smile to Elsa’s face, the first genuine expression of joy that Vanitas had seen cross her aloof features?

“So, what will Elsa accept? Light or darkness? I know I wanna know!”
-ce with golden hands that burned with an ethereal light against the concrete storm clouds. A deep, booming thunder rung through his ears, and the smell of damp moss filled his nostrils. Vanitas could feel his heart straining against his ribs with every beat, sucking him dry until he became indistinguishable from the feeble Shadows that prowled the realm. The frigid expanse that stretched across his chest was as cold as the tundras of Arendelle, and it sent bloodcurdling shivers down his spine.

“I-I know that castle,” Vanitas stammered out. “That’s… Cinderella’s castle…”

“The Castle of Dreams,” Aqua sighed as if the vision had stolen her breath away. “We don’t know how long the Realm of Darkness has kept it trapped, but the Heartless had already devoured its heart by the time I was stranded here.”

Vanitas still told himself that he didn’t care about the residents of the worlds he had fed to the Heartless. That they were nameless casualties in a war fought above their heads and were no better than fodder for his cannons. He had no attachment to the citizens of Halloween Town, the people of Thebes, or the inhabitants of Twilight Town. Vanitas could tell himself that until he was blue in the face, but his heart would scream in protest until he could no longer drown it out. The black-haired Keyblade wielder had barely set foot in the Castle of Dreams, unable to tolerate the arrogance in the air and the snooty expressions on the faces of the nobles. They looked down upon those less fortunate and sneered at their plight.

So why? Why was his heart pounding at the sight of the ruined palace? Why was his chest overflowing with grief?

“B-But…”

Vanitas was unable to finish his thought. The predator that had been tracking their every move sensed his hesitation and leapt into action, tearing down the street at top speed and bringing several buildings crashing down with it. The placid air filled with silver dust as the houses crumbled into nothingness, a fearsome orange pumpkin charging through the mist and barrelling down on the Keyblade wielders. Aqua gasped and grabbed Vanitas by the scruff of his neck, throwing them both to the side as the deformed gourd nearly crushed them into pulp below its girth. Vanitas winced as his chin guard ricocheted off the stone barrier of the bridge, his ears ringing with the impact but still alive and kicking. He sprung to his feet and summoned the Void Gear as the pumpkin smashed against a supporting column, sending shockwaves down the bridge and filling the air with ominous creaking.

“A Cursed Coach!” Aqua bellowed, following in Vanitas’ wake and summoning her own Keyblade. “We can’t outrun that thing; we need to fight it!”

“You don’t need to tell me twice,” Riku grumbled, throwing himself at the infuriated gourd and pruning its vines before they could wrap themselves around his legs. He attempted to impale the monster with Braveheart, but the rind of the pumpkin was too thick to penetrate and reflected the attack right back. The remaining vines curled into a facsimile of carriage wheels and rapidly spun itself around, revealing a face fixed in a sorrowful frown and a maw filled with wrought iron teeth. The Cursed Coach locked its sights upon Vanitas, digging the thorns on its vines into the cracked bricks and propelling itself towards the raven boy.

“STOPZA!”

The carriage suddenly froze in midair as if encased in ice, its patchy leaves still fluttering in the wind and drool running down its chin. Mickey tugged Riku to his feet and clambered up the overgrown pumpkin, striking the stem atop its head with the Star Seeker before his hastily-cast spell relinquished
its hold on the monster.

“Come on, get it while it’s Stopped!”

Aqua fixated her attention on the limbs of the Cursed Coach, allowing her gaze to lock onto the individual vines that formed its wheels and chassis. She had faced this particular beast once before while defending Cinderella from her murderous step-family, so she was well aware of the dangers posed by such an agile monster. The coach couldn’t ram the party over the walls of the bridge if it couldn’t move. Once her magic was homed in on the pumpkin’s appendages, she collected the energy in the tip of her Keyblade and allowed it to burst forward in a myriad of fireworks that carved through the thin vines. As Mickey’s magic surpassed its limits and released its hold on the squash, the vines continued to writhe along the ground without a brain to guide them.

The orange coach thumped heavily to the ground and let out a wail of surprise as it suddenly found itself lacking its primary mode of transport. Aqua should’ve known that such a devious creature wouldn’t be stopped so easily. Rather than rely on its makeshift wheels, the pumpkin merely pushed itself forward with its few remaining vines and began to roll rapidly towards Vanitas like a wrecking ball. He had no idea what had caused the coach to take such personal offence to his existence, but he wasn’t about to take it lying down. Rather than leap out of its warpath, the raven boy bunkered down and deflected the rampaging gourd before the weighty mass turned him into a pancake.

“You have two! Use mine as well!”

Vanitas felt a surge of heat rush down his left arm and terminate in his palm, scorching his skin as if enveloped in an inferno. He could hear the Kingdom Key screaming to him alongside its owner, begging for a chance to tear into the pumpkin before it brought the whole bridge down around them. Vanitas grinned and heeded the weapon’s pleas, summoning the Kingdom Key into his left hand to join the Void Gear that thrummed with energy in his right. He instantly launched the Kingdom Key at the rolling pumpkin, the blade spinning through the air like a boomerang and halting the monster in its tracks. The squash didn’t get a chance to react before the Void Gear found its place in its jaw, smashing through metal teeth and sending the beast careening backwards. The Kingdom Key shattered into shards of light before it could touch the ground, reappearing in Vanitas’ hand and then promptly hurled at the carriage once more.

“This is way more effective with two of these!” Vanitas exclaimed in delight, the twin Keyblades working together to double his damage output. Each blow forced the coach back, but it wasn’t long before the black-haired boy’s stamina petered out. Sora and Roxas made lugging two oversized keys around look like child’s play, but they were so bulky and unwieldy. His biceps ached just from gripping one weapon in each hand! The final strike against the pumpkin threw the beast over the edge of the bridge with a thump, scattering dried leaves as it plummeted into the thorny forest below. The last sound the carriage ever emitted was the crunch of its rind shattering against the rocks and spilling its juicy guts across the parched soil.

“Nice work, Vanitas!” Aqua quipped, flashing him a gentle smile. Vanitas rubbed his nape where she had hoisted him up and thrown him out of the path of the rampaging carriage. Never in a million years did he expect the blunette to lay a hand on him for any reason other than to throttle him. His neck tingled as a purple bruise slowly grew beneath his skin, but it was much better than being tangled up in those wheels.

BONG
BONG
BONG
The pealing of the clock tower sent thunderous shockwaves through the dense clouds that embraced the spire, scattering the thunderhead and allowing rays of azure light to peek through. The booming echoed across the desolate town and brought the party to their knees as their eardrums threatened to rupture. Vanitas was sure he was screaming, but his voice was drowned out by the bell that continued to ring without end. The ground beneath his feet gave way as the bridge crumbled to dust, demolished by the power of the siren only to construct a new path in its place. Vanitas scrambled to cling onto the stone bricks, but the dual Keyblades still nestled in his palms impeded his grip, and he toppled head over heels into the forest below.

Bright sparks of light waltzed across his vision as Vanitas crashed through the spider web of foliage, skin shielded from the thorns by his leather bodysuit but bearing the full brunt of his impact against the forest floor. He lay stationary for a moment as the air was forced from his lungs by the collision, grateful that he had not fallen face-first and received a mouthful of dirty leaves. The displaced storm clouds had parted to reveal the icy-blue light of Kingdom Hearts hovering above like a vulture, ready to swoop down and devour his lifeless body. The faint scent of pumpkin lingered in the air, and orange goop from the decimated carriage lay splattered across everything in sight. *Gross.*

Vanitas groaned in pain and pushed himself up with his forearms, brushing loose leaves out of his spiky obsidian hair like confetti. A deep ache was already congregating in his spine and knees, and his chest burned from inhaling sicky-sweet pollen. Riku thrashed around with his plaid jacket snagged on a thorn, leaving him suspended comically in the air. Mickey scattered golden leaves as he burst from a pile of foliage, spitting them from his mouth and plucking them from his ears. Aqua gracefully descended as if cradled by an updraft, her skirt and sleeves billowing in the wind as her Graviga magic gently guided her to solid ground.

"You know, Sora could've washed up anywhere," Vanitas spat, flicking specks of dirt from his bodysuit and grimacing. "Could've been the Destiny Islands. Maybe Corona. Hell, I'd even taken Port Royal! Why the hell did he choose the Realm of Darkness?!"

"For once, I have to agree," Aqua murmured as Riku freed himself and splatted on the ground with a loud *"OOF."* "At least we're getting closer. The Forest of Thorns leads to the shoreline, but we'll likely be dodging a few Darksides on the way. They really like this place for some reason. I don't know how they fit between the trees."

"So… this is the Enchanted Dominion then?" Vanitas pondered, his yellow eyes basking in the sight of the vicious thorns and impenetrable vines. The greenery had conquered the once luscious fields and knotted themselves together to the point that he couldn't make out a clear path through the thicket. This was a trick that Maleficent seemed particularly fond of, and Vanitas could recall the witch attempting to overrun the Kingdom with the weeds while transformed into a dragon. The plants must've grown out of control under the influence of the darkness.

"Wait… this doesn't make sense!" Sora exclaimed in horror, stepped back from the vines as if they would reach out and drag him into the forest. "Mickey, you must have known this world was trapped here! I could've saved it during the Mark of Mastery!"

Mickey noted that the expression of fury on Sora's face was very different from the one that frequented Vanitas', even though it was technically the same collection of features. Vanitas' voice would fill with bubbling acid, and his yellow eyes would burn through the thickest walls. Sora's eyes betrayed the anger he harboured towards himself, still consumed by the belief that he had more to prove of himself. The brunette's humility was a breath of fresh air compared to the concrete wall that Vanitas had built around himself. Mickey just wished that Sora knew how to turn his feeling of inadequacy off.
"Well, this world's heart is not sleeping," he slowly explained so that Sora could understand. "We'll likely never uncover the specific events that led to the Enchanted Dominion falling to darkness, but Maleficent likely allowed the Heartless to consume the world's heart. It'll be up there now."

Mickey gestured up at Kingdom Hearts that was being gradually enveloped by the clouds once more. The clock tower had fallen silent now that its job was accomplished, the bridges leading up to the desolate palace now ripped to shreds and rebuilt in a different layout. It was the only indication that time had passed since they had tumbled out of the Corridor of Darkness. The blue light cast opaque shadows across the forest floor that grew in size and depth as the moon retreated behind the cloud cover, throwing the Guardians of Light into its umbra.

"When you defeated Ansem - the bad one, that is - all the worlds he consumed to create his Kingdom Hearts were restored," Mickey continued. The final beams of light were snuffed out by the clouds, and ghostly twilight descended upon the Forest of Thorns. "But Cinderella's and Aurora's worlds weren't devoured by Ansem. They fell to darkness long before Ansem was born. They'll remain here until the hearts of the worlds are released from the Kingdom Hearts sealed away here, in the Realm of Darkness."

Riku turned his eyes away from the fading remnants of Kingdom Hearts to spot Sora staring down at the earth, yellow eyes narrowed and shoulders raised in frustration. Even when residing within another’s body, the brunette wore his heart on his sleeve. Through the ebony-black hair, metal jaw piece and leather armour, Riku could still recognise the soul of his best friend.

"Tell you what," he stated, cutting through the uneasy silence. "Once all of this is done, let's come back and return these worlds to their rightful states."

“I would like that too,” Aqua chimed in. “It’s been a long time since I spoke to Cinderella or Aurora. It’d be nice to finally bring them back home.”

“Mm-hmm!” Mickey nodded in agreement. “Snow White too! Her world is here somewhere, stuck behind a mirror. I guess our work is never done!”

“Tell you what,” he stated, cutting through the uneasy silence. "Once all of this is done, let's come back and return these worlds to their rightful states."

Sora’s face crumpled as if he was about to burst into tears. Before Riku could extend a hand in comfort, the brunette wiped his eyes with the back of his glove and nodded firmly. His golden eyes burned with a renewed confidence as if the light in his heart outshone that of Kingdom Hearts itself.

"I'll hold you to that," Sora asserted, his passion reinvigorated by the kindness of his friends. "Let's go get my body back."

Without a second thought, he stomped back up to the insurmountable wall of vines and sliced the Kingdom Key through the foliage. The Keyblade’s power pulsed in sync with his own renewed strength and effortlessly carved through the plants, scattering fragments of writhing vines across the ground and revealing a path through the forest. The greenery that remained attached to their stems retracted in fright as if scorched by the incredible light radiating from the Keyblade wielder's heart.

"OI! SORA! GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE!"

Vanitas bolted into the ravine created by his Keyblade, whittling down the protruding vines wherever he went. Aqua and Mickey just shook their heads. Riku slapped his face with his palm and groaned in disbelief. Never a dull moment. The crew followed Vanitas' lead with a little more restraint, the injured plants withdrawing as they delved deeper into the ruins of the Enchanted Dominion. Mickey was sure that he caught the scuttling of Heartless out of the corner of his eye, but
the woodlands were too densely packed to distinguish one shadow from the next. With all the ruckus that Vanitas was causing by hacking away at the monsters’ home, they were bound to draw the attention of something unpleasant sooner rather than later.

“DIE, YOU OVERGROWN RASPBERRY BUSHES! DIE!”

Yep, definitely sooner.

Vanitas was having a whale of a time thrashing through the vines like a jungle explorer until a giant fist came down on the spot where he once stood and almost crushed him to a pulp. He gasped and turned his head in confusion, only for a low-hanging vine to sweep down and clobber him over the head while he wasn't looking. Riku, Aqua and Mickey skidded to a halt before meeting a similar fare, their situational awareness as sharp as knives and not dampened by unrestrained glee like their companion. The fist embedded its fingers into the mossy earth and spawned a raging vortex of darkness, spitting out tiny Shadows that emerged from the ground like gravestones. A pair of luminescent yellow eyes gleamed between the trees, framed by dreadlocks and topped off with a heart-shaped hole cut cleanly through its chest.

“It’s a Darkside!” Mickey exclaimed, readying the Star Seeker for battle. “So this is where they’re all hiding!”

Vanitas picked his ass up off the floor just in time to spot a second Darkside nearing the Guardians of Light from the rear. Seems like his clamouring had drawn the attention of the Heartless and they were now valiantly defending their home. The second Darkside was followed by a third, then a fourth… and a fifth?! How many giants could fit in this damned forest anyway?!

"Just run! There's no end to them!” Aqua exclaimed, swatting aside a few Shadows that dared to swipe at her ankles. She had first-hand experience of just how many Darksides could pack themselves between the vines of the Forest of Thorns. Even with five Keyblades between them, there was little hope of purging the woodlands of the monsters.

"Yeah, I'm not dealing with that!” Vanitas bellowed in agreement and scampered away, dodging the vine that had battered him over the head. Riku and Mickey made themselves scarce as huge knots of creepers were uprooted by the approaching Heartless like blood clots ripped from their arteries. The unholy darkness exuding from the gaping holes in each Darkside’s chest smothered the light of the Kingdom Key, reinvigorating the living vines and restarting their assault on the intruders. Vanitas cut through the foliage as hard as he could, but the thicket only seemed to grow denser as they fought to escape the clutches of the Heartless.

“Hop on that vine; we’re almost there!”

Vanitas' eyes were immediately drawn to a crystal-blue vine that lay peacefully on the forest floor. Vibrant purples and reds reflected off its surface as a Darkside shot a ball of congealed darkness from the hole in its chest and past the heads of the retreating Keyblade wielders. The ground surrounding the unusual vine was stripped of all plant matter as if the very material it was made of was repelling the darkness. Perhaps it was a relic that survived the Enchanted Dominion's descent into twilight, still clinging onto the magic that once coursed through the veins of the world. Vanitas let out a gasp of relief and skipped onto the stem, his boots skidding down the length of the vine as if it was an organic grind rail. He lowered his stance to make himself more aerodynamic, building up speed that quickly put distance between him and the encroaching tsunami of Darksides. The wind in his hair and adrenaline in his veins almost convinced him that he wasn't running for his life. The black-haired Keyblade wielder could imagine the exultant hollering of Tarzan beside him as he dodged through the jungle canopy, plucking fruit from the trees as they passed. He wasn't fleeing – it was merely a ‘tactical retreat'.
Vanitas smelled the salty ocean air before he saw it. The crystal vine twisted through the forest and down a steep slope before abruptly terminating at the edge of the dunes, almost sending Vanitas flying as his grinding rail disappeared beneath his feet. He once detested the feeling of fine sand particles worming their way into his hair and down his pants, but it was a godsend compared to the forsaken forest and its cursed inhabitants. A grin crept across his face as he sprinted towards the shoreline, filling the stale air with the sound of crunching sand and panting lungs. He swore he could see the indent left by the Void gear when he had wedged it into the charcoal beach in frustration as if no living being had set foot on the Dark Margin since the Door to Light whisked him away.

"Any sign of Sora?" Riku yelled, shielding his eyes with one hand and peering across the featureless shoreline. He dreaded the thought of laying his eyes on the prone, motionless form of his best friend like a piece of rotted driftwood washed up on the shore. Somehow, the thought of spotting nothing at all was even worse.

“Nada,” Vanitas replied, edging closer to the waterfront in his search. He wasn’t sure whether to look for a suit of neglected armour or that uncontrollable brown birds nest he called a haircut, but Sora was nowhere to be found in the waves.

“Nothing here either…” Aqua agreed, peering out from behind one of the many stone arches that littered the landscape. “I’m not heading home without him.”

“You better fucking not!” Vanitas yelled back.

"Hey, do you guys hear something?"

At first, Vanitas had assumed that his head was just overflowing with the crashing of waves. As time passed, the sound evolved into a baritone rumble that shook the pebbles beneath his feet as if something was barrelling towards them. Sora was far too scrawny to create such a ruckus, and their view of the beach was clear for miles around. There was no way they could be snuck up o-

The trees marking the divide between the Forest of Thorns and the Dark Margin collapsed as an enormous Demon Tower ploughed through the timber and pulverised them into sawdust. The conglomeration of countless Shadows scuttled over each other like insects, their forms melting together to create a core of pure darkness that filled the air with the smell of copper. The sand barely managed to hold the weight of the giant Heartless, shifting beneath its feet and threatening to send it toppling to the ground.

“Are those… the Shadows created by all those Darksides?” Mickey gasped as the Demon Tide slid along the unsteady ground towards the Guardians of Light. Vanitas swore under his breath and began to race back to the others to provide backup, but it wasn’t necessary. Before any of the Keyblade wielders could even ready their weapons, an almighty splash resounded across the Dark Margin as a pillar of water jettisoned up into the air. The brine seemed to cling to something metallic at its core, plummeting down onto the Demon Tower and obliterating the gooey nucleus before the Heartless could approach any further. As the fine mist of saltwater settled, it revealed the figure that had leapt out of the ocean: a person clad from head to toe in weighty black-speckled armour. Glances of silver metal peeked through layers of rust and oxidation, the wing embellishments on the forearms and shins dulled and uneven from months of exposure to the fickle whims of the ocean. The few Heartless that had survived the brutal ambush scurried away before the figure could smash them under its boots. As the crowd of Shadows dispersed, the stranger stood up to their full height to reveal the Unversed emblem scorched into their helmet framed by two unfurled wings.

“That’s Ventus’ armour!” Aqua choked, her voice catching in her throat at the sight of her baby brother’s distorted armour.
"Heh, about time you showed yourself, Sora," Vanitas grinned, feeling his heart lurch in his chest as his stowaway reached out to his body. "Now, are we gonna do this the easy way? Or the hard way?"

The figure continued to stare at him in stony silence. Sora's body wordlessly raised its right hand, the metal armour creaking as flakes of rust waltzed to the ground as its joint moved for the first time three months. It held its hand out at arms length as if expecting something to materialise in its grasp. Vanitas knew that Sora's unruly mop of chocolate hair and ocean-blue eyes were encased within the armour, but the unnaturally stiff motions made it seem like his body was a puppet. Not even its chest moved with each breath it took as if the rust had overwhelmed the joints and solidified the armour where it stood.

Vanitas opened his mouth to demand that Sora's body respond to his words or even acknowledge his existence, but his heart skipped a beat before his breath could pass his lips. His left palm burned like red-hot coals as the Kingdom Key shattered in his grasp before reappearing in the fist of Ventus' armour. The raven boy studied his empty hand in disbelief, tugging on the leash that his heart had tied around the weapon. He could feel the Keyblade resisting his call as if it had glued itself to his master's body. Not even the desperate pleading of Sora's heart reverberating alongside his own was enough to tempt the blade back into his arms. The Kingdom Key seemed to acknowledge the lifeless, heartless husk as its true master as if it no longer recognised the brunette's soul.

"Alright, the hard way it is then!"

Vanitas reared his Keyblade-arm back like a cobra preparing to strike and lunged into a Sonic Rave, repeatedly jabbing towards Sora's body with the teeth of the Void Gear. Ventus' armour flexed its knees to launch out of his warpath, but a sharp "Blizzaga!" from Aqua encased its feet in solid ice and affixed it to the spot. The armour flipped the Kingdom Key into a reverse grip as if mimicking the moves of the blond who once donned it and brought the weapon up to block Vanitas' onslaught. The defence was enough to reflect the first strike, but the second cleaved through its shield and pierced its chest. No Keyblade could ever hope to penetrate the armour of a Keyblade wielder, even in such an unfavourable condition, but the blow was enough to send Sora's body careening backwards as fragments of shattered ice danced around him.

Hey, be careful with my body! My Mom never kept the receipt!

Ventus' armour soared gracefully through the air without uttering a single cry. If it hadn't been for the premonition in Sora's fitful dream, Vanitas would've assumed that he was fighting a languid automaton. A towering pillar of water surged up out of the ocean as Mickey bent it to his will, sending it cascading towards Sora's body with a roaring "WATERA!" The animated armour skidded to a halt on the slate-grey sand, but the combined assault hit it with such a rapid flurry of attacks that it was unable to react in time. The water scooped up Ventus' armour and tossed it into the air, just in time for Riku to jump up and smash it back into the ground with all the force of a raging bull. A veil of sand billowed up around the armour as the impact left it resting in the centre of a small crater. Riku felt his heart consumed by guilt at the thought of Sora's body suffering bruises by his hand, but he reminded himself that it was all just a means to an end.

"… Did we do it?" Vanitas asked tentatively. Ventus' armour didn't move from the spot where it lay face down in the sand. "Is it over?"

"Why did Sora attack us like that?" Riku questioned, spitting sand out of his mouth. "How is his body even moving on its own?"

"It's not," Mickey stated, dismissing the Star Seeker and rushing up to administer healing magic.
“Ventus’ armour is just trying to protect him. I don’t think it can tell the difference between those who want to help Sora and those who want to hurt him.”

The King attempted to bathe the brunette's downed body in the therapeutic light of Curaga, but a vortex of darkness manifested below the suit of armour and consumed it before the mouse could even raise a finger. The maelstrom then dissipated into the surrounding sands leaving nothing in its wake as if Sora had vanished from the face of the earth.

“What the-“

If the Guardians of Light hadn't been so stunned by Sora’s sudden disappearance, they might have noticed the exit to the wormhole materialise behind them. Vanitas heard the rush of wind as the vortex spat out Ventus' armour like a hairball, but was unable to move in time before the Kingdom Key collided with the back of his head and sent him flying. The shockwave created by Sora's sweeping attack pushed both Riku and Mickey down the slate-grey sand and towards the roaring ocean. Their combined assault had done nothing to slow the relentless armour down.

“VANITAS!”

Sora's body thumped down onto the sand and hurled the Kingdom Key at Vanitas, only to be intercepted by Aqua who leapt in to deflect the blow with her signature Barrier. The spherical shield prevented the whirling Keyblade from reaching the raven boy as he picked himself up from the ground, shaking his head to muffle the ringing in his ears. That was the second time that Aqua had protected him from harm, and it was no less startling than the first. Ventus' armour propelled itself into a furious Fever Pitch, drilling towards Aqua and catching the Kingdom Key in its hand to form a tornado of hate. Its moves were lacking in skill or coordination, but it was fast. Aqua was ready to launch into her Dreamweaver command style, but the armour was too nimble for her magic to lock onto. Every Firaga she cast just whizzed past its head, barely even warming the surface of the metal. The combination of Ventus' rapid attack style and Sora's brazen confidence had created a monstrous, tireless foe that refused to stand still.

Sora could feel his left hand burning as if engulfed by flames as Aqua continued to wage war against his reanimated body. It didn't matter how loud he screamed at the Kingdom Key, it refused to heed his call and return to his side. The weapon was just as stubborn as its owner. He pushed himself to his feet and attempted to throw himself at Ventus' armour from behind, but the reverse grip it had on his Keyblade allowed it to swiftly turn and smack him across the chin with the hilt of the weapon. The Kingdom Key wasn't designed to be wielded backwards, and it showed – the pommel was too weighty to allow for precise striking, but it made for an effective bludgeon. His vision momentarily split in two as he felt his jaw piece fracture as metal collided against metal, collapsing into the gentle embrace of the charcoal sand. Could it possibly be that neither he nor Vanitas had the strength to overpower his reanimate body? Were they really so helpless without the might of the Kingdom Key by their side?

Ventus' armour pulled back its right arm and prepared to behead Sora with the reverse grip of his own Keyblade. He raised his arm across his face in a feeble attempt to deter the unstoppable rampage of his stolen body, and both he and Vanitas screamed into the abyss for the last time.
I N T R I S
N T E R E S T I N G
U N O R T H O D O X
U N P R E S E D E N T E D

D Ũ U A R T N ŕ T M I N E M A S T E R
Y E T D Ũ U C A L L U P ŕ N M I N E S T R E N G T H

H ŕ ŵ W D ŕ E R E P E E
D Ũ U M U S T P R ŕ ŕ V E P I N E S E L F W ŕ R T H Y

A Y E
P E R H A P S
J U S T
Any doubt in Vanitas' or Sora's conjoined hearts was washed away as an awe-inspiring light ignited within their souls and decimated the shadows of uncertainty. The ringing in their ears and their spiralling vision cleared as if touched by a healing light that outshone that of the sun, and a carefree smile spread across their face. Their overworked muscles still shrieked in pain, yet it no longer mattered. They were engulfed in a mother's embrace, and there wasn't a single thing that could've dampened their rapturous glee. They could feel every grain of sand on their skin and every kiss of the ocean spray against their face. Ventus' armour moved in slow motion as if the rotation of the earth beneath their feet had screeched to a halt around them. They licked their lips, feeling the tip of their tongue tingle as unfiltered magic roared through their veins.

The two hopped to their feet and clenched the hilt of the Void Gear in both hands. The applause of the Keyblade was drowned beneath the thunder that reverberated through their shared chest. As the Kingdom Key edged its way closer to their neck, Sora and Vanitas swiped the Void Gear across the torso of the tattered armour. The teeth of the blade didn't come close to scraping the surface of the metal, but it wasn't necessary. The Void Gear was quickly consumed in blinding white light that morphed its shape into one that both recognised all too well, and the particles of matter shed by its transformation coalesced into a beam of light that tore through the layers of protection surrounding Sora's body. It wasn't enough to release it from the bindings of Ventus' armour, but it was enough to defer its oncoming attack and throw it across the sands to join the others by the oceanfront.

Vanitas and Sora broke free of their unadulterated excitement to look down at the Keyblade in their hand. It was a sight they had both witnessed before. Sure, the filigree was stained with coffee-brown rust and snapped in multiple places, and the emerald green blade was chipped and bent at a slight angle, but there was no other Keyblade in the multiverse like it. It had taken the combined might of both Sora and Vanitas to summon it, but the broken \( \chi \)-blade lay firmly in their grasp. The weapon hadn't trusted them enough to bequeath the most extreme limits of its power and had manifested in a weakened state, but the light that pulsed through the welded pommels scorched their skin even through their leather glove. It was unfathomably heavy, and not just because of its size. The weight of the universe itself seemed to teeter on the razor edge of the blade.

“… Yeah, that'll do,” Vanitas grinned as the dense cloud cover parted like the tide to allow the icy-blue presence of Kingdom Hearts to cast its rays over the desolate beach, summoned by the song of the \( \chi \)-blade. Ventus' armour picked itself up and tightened its grasp on the Kingdom Key. The Keyblade shuddered in its hand as if quivering at the sight of the almighty weapon. Vanitas ran his hand over the splinter in his metal jaw piece and tore it from his face, tossing the broken guard aside and losing it to the embrace of the charcoal sand. He hadn't donned his helmet in many months, and he had no plans to mask his face again. The jaw piece had served its purpose.

Sora’s body dissolved into darkness and slurried to the ground, disappearing into the sand like the many Heartless that had come before it. It attempted to close the gap between Vanitas and itself to drag the black-haired Keyblade wielder into the depths of darkness, but the light from the \( \chi \)-blade was too intense. The moment it came within striking distance, the metal armour absorbed the energy of the Keyblade and began to sizzle as the temperature of the alloy rapidly increased. It was unceremoniously expelled from the ground, staggering away as if Vanitas has struck it without ever making contact. Sora laughed at the sight and raised the \( \chi \)-blade in the air, clenching both hands as the sheer mass of the weapon threatened to topple him. Kingdom Hearts seemed to pulse like a living organ as an orb of yellow light condensed at the tip of the conjoined blade. The blue rays of sunlight streamed down from the heart of all hearts and lent their power to the weapon that summoned it like liquid gold. Sora felt stabbing pain shoot through his chest as his weakened heart struggled to maintain its individuality against the voices of the countless souls within Kingdom Hearts, begging
him to join them in endless peace. The light felt so good, yet it hurt so badly. Vanitas and Sora let out a cry of victory and shredded the orb of light with the χ-blade, snapping the broken blade in two and sending a glorious cross of pure energy careening across the beach and towards the awaiting armour.

“It is futile. The Keyblade alone cannot seal the Door to Darkness.”

Vanitas wasn’t sure if it was even worth arguing with Ansem any more. He could recall so many times that he had been taught the same thing: the brightest light shines in the deepest darkness. There was something to be admired about Ansem’s zeal, but it was becoming more and more difficult to justify his attempts at offering an olive branch. Sora’s mother had always taught him that every person deserved a second chance, no matter how insurmountable their grievances were. It required a strength of heart that not even Vanitas himself possessed to admit that he was wrong. To acknowledge that their efforts were misguided and to make amends for the actions that had done more harm than good. To seek forgiveness from those who had every right to refuse and to find the courage to forgive himself. Sora desperately wanted to see the light within Ansem’s heart, but it was time to admit that the man had crossed the event horizon. There was no saving Ansem if he no longer wanted to be saved.

“Kingdom Hearts! Fill me with the power of darkness!”

Ansem roared into the void and stretched one hand towards the Door to Darkness. Their fighting had taken a toll on both their bodies, and Vanitas wasn’t sure he could survive another round if the man got what he wanted. He wasn’t sure that Ansem was sincerely ready for what lay waiting beyond that white marble doorway. The Door to Darkness slowly creaked open in response to Ansem’s pleas, allowing rivulets of twilight to eddy between the cracks and spill into the End of the World. A look of joy overtook Ansem’s face, and he reached out with what little heart he still clung to within his chest. He could still do it. He could still force the darkness under his command and destroy the insolent child where he stood. He could still bring about the prophecy that his future self had imparted upon him.

“You’re wrong,” Sora whispered, his lungs burning and eyelids drooping with exhaustion. There were times when his resolve had faltered; that he considered laying down his Keyblade and following Riku into the darkness just for a chance to take the pain away. He had seen Kairi’s motionless body and sacrificed himself to release her heart, expecting to never bask in the warm glow of the sun again. He had crossed the threshold at the End of the World and chased after Ansem, expecting to leave the Realm of Light and his friends behind. He had constructed a haphazard raft with his best friends, expecting to never lay eyes on his mother and her patient smile again.

“I know now, without a doubt. Kingdom Hearts… is light!”

“Sora? You still with us?”

Sora gasped and dragged precious air into his lungs that shrieked as if he had been holding his breath and starving his body of oxygen. Aqua shook him gently by the shoulders with an expression of grave concern, her cobalt-blue hair shimmering like diamonds under the pale light of Kingdom Hearts. He snapped back to awareness and pulled away from her grip, expecting to find Ventus’ armour poised behind her with the stolen Kingdom Key ready to cleave through her chest and send her heart to join the others that awaited them in the skies above. Aqua refused to allow her grip to slip from his shoulders.
"Hey, take a deep breath," she insisted, her voice level and a calm smile spreading across her face. "It's over. You did it."

Sora searched her eyes for a sign of deceit, but only saw the exhaustion and relief that dwelled within her ocean-blue orbs. He allowed his breath to slow and his heart to steady, rubbing a bead of sweat off his forehead. His palm still clung to the shattered hilt of the χ-blade, the ethereal weapon now cleaved in half and broken beyond repair after being pushed to its limits. Mickey and Riku were huddled over a figure lying supine on the sand as green magic ebbed from their hands and bathed it in healing light. Fragments of armour lay scattered across the Dark Margin as if decimated by an unstoppable blow, revealing the form of the person that was once cloaked by its protective shield.

Sora wasn't sure if he had just spent too long stuck inside Vanitas' body, but the untamed mess of chocolate spikes atop the gently slumbering face of his body now seemed so foreign to him.

“He’s still breathing, but only just,” Mickey stated as his energy was sapped by the rivers of magic he was forcing into Sora’s body. “Ventus’ armour did a good job of protecting him. I don’t know if his body would’ve survived without it.”

Vanitas could tell that Sora’s body had been through a lot. His sunkissed complexion had turned a ghostly white, and his chest barely moved with each breath he took. It was a testament to Sora’s strength that his body had remained alive without a heart to fuel it, like a machine with its cables cut. He wondered just how much of his terrible condition could be attributed to the beating it had withstood as Ventus’ armour tried to protect it from a threat that no longer existed. Vanitas shook his head and cast the unusable χ-blade to the ground, the remainder of the weapon dissolving into flecks of light that scattered to the ocean breeze. The pearlescent glow of Kingdom Hearts sunk behind the cloud layer once more without the χ-blade to act as its anchor. He swore he could still hear the chorus of voices radiating from the heart of all hearts, enticing him to enter their midst before the storm clouds stifled their tongues. He was surprised to find that the call of light was just as intoxicating as the call of darkness.

“Wait a sec,” Vanitas exclaimed as Riku attempted to haul Sora’s body onto his shoulders. Before the Guardians of Light could query his motivation, he slipped his Gummiphone out of his pocket and snapped a shot of the scene. He grinned and pulled a peace sign as the camera immortalised the image of Aqua, Riku and Mickey huddled over Sora’s lifeless body with expressions of disbelief on their faces, before sending it to the group chat.

aosora: soras dead
soHotImOnFire: can someone pls take vanitas’s phone away from him
Sane_Scientist: Well, that wasn’t quite the method I was expecting you to use to procure Sora’s body.
Sane_Scientist: Regardless, good work, everyone! We’re one step closer to our end goal.
sweet_memories: what did you do to him?! notanobody: well i just found my new screensaver number_imaginary: this chat is going 2 kill me 1 day still_not_a_keyblade_master: so do we consider this a victory or?
10_year_nap: ummm is that my armour?
10_year_nap: why dus it luk lyk sora got beat up?
10_year_nap: can ny1 xplain wots goin on?! ш(°Д° ш)
Luna_Diviner: Don’t make me put this chat in slow mode.
aoSora: yeh i kicked his butt lol popped a cap in his ass u no how i b bruh
Luna_Diviner: Your grammar is incomprehensible.
aoSora: dnt u dare bring my grandma in2 this
Riku slapped the Gummiphone out of Vanitas’ hand and knocked the evil grin off his face.

“Do you have any sense of tact?!” he demanded. Aqua had her head in her hands. Mickey looked like he was judging Vanitas hard.

"Nah, I left that in the Realm of Darkness along with my self-preservation," Vanitas shrugged. Riku considered how satisfying it would be to knock some sense into the black-haired Keyblade wielder. He also considered if Sora would forgive him for laying a hand on the person he had promised to treat better.

Riku grunted as he hauled Sora onto his back in a fireman’s carry, gripping onto the brunette's jacket and pants and resting his torso across his shoulder blades. The brunette didn't even wince at the motion as if he was so heavily swaddled in sleep that nothing could stir him.

"So," he stated decisively. "Who's going to explain to the others that we beat up Sora."

"I guess it should be me?" Vanitas contemplated. "I mean, that's who everyone will expect to be responsible, anyway."

Aqua felt a pang of guilt worm its way into her heart at Vanitas’ words. She knew he was right, but that didn’t make her feel any better about the situation. Vanitas would likely face some opposition when they returned to the Mysterious Tower once the others became privy to Sora’s tumultuous condition. It was easy to point fingers at Vanitas considering his track record, but somehow she no longer felt that was fair. Perhaps it was because the black-haired boy had discarded that hideous jaw piece that made his features seem much harsher than they truly were, but she was struggling to see the dangerous monster that she once perceived. If it weren’t for the darker hair strands and unnaturally golden eyes, she would’ve sworn that Sora was standing right in front of her.

“No, I won’t let you do that,” Aqua refused, drawing a raised eyebrow from Vanitas. “I won’t let you take the blame when there is no one to hold accountable. We did what we had to do. If it means that I have to take some responsibility for this, then so be it.”

“Have you gone soft?” Riku jested, throwing her an amused smile and beginning the trek back into the Forest of Thorns.

“Maybe a little,” Aqua chuckled, returning the gesture. "I guess all that time spent in the Realm of Darkness has given me a little more appreciation for what Vanitas is going through."

If Aqua could’ve gone back in time and told her younger self that she would one day fight alongside Vanitas as equals and not as mortal foes, she would’ve slapped herself. Vanitas had wielded the desolate χ-blade once before when he had forced Ventus into submission and formed an unholy union with his brother. She could still recall how her little brother’s face had been warped by animalistic glee as Vanitas wrenched his body from him and forced her to attack one of her best friends. The reappearance of the weapon should’ve filled her with distress, but the vision of evil had never appeared. Instead, the only expression that graced Vanitas’ face was that of long-awaited peace.

Maybe the others were right. Maybe it wasn’t too late for Vanitas.

Maybe this whole situation was exactly what Vanitas needed to accept the light within his own heart.

Mickey knew he should be rejoicing that the time of reckoning was almost upon them. Sora’s body...
had been retrieved from the Realm of Darkness. Ienzo had located the missing pieces of Sora’s heart. Vanitas had put aside his hatred for the Guardians of Light and was no longer opposing them.

So why did he feel so… apprehensive?

Why did he feel like it was too good to be true?

…

Well, whatever. Mickey refused to dawdle on what-ifs and what-could-be’s. What’s done is done. Ventus, Roxas and Xion should already be waiting at the Mysterious Tower. Whatever difficulties lay around the corner, ready to pounce and tear their motley crew apart, would have to wait. After three months of fruitless searching, endless nights spent tearing his library apart for the smallest clue, countless hours wasted scanning every inch of Ansem’s archives for the tinies hint, Mickey refused to give up. Sora was coming home, regardless of what it took to bring him back.
Hey. So.
Did anyone notice that every chapter has contained some kind of reference to beheading?

Huh.
How ‘bout that.

(✧ ≖ ͜ʖ ≖ ≖)

Kairi often turned her mind back to the aeons spent swaddled within Sora's heart like a newborn babe. The heart of Destiny Islands cowered within the darkness, quivering and afraid before the tidal wave of Heartless that descended upon it. The redhead had spent many sleepless nights wondering what slumbered behind that mysterious door, tucked away in an oubliette behind curtains of verdant moss. It wasn’t how she imagined unearthing the riddles of her homeworld would come to pass. The colossal overflow of light from the obliterated doorframe hit Kairi like a freight train, stealing away her breath and shredding through muscle and bone. It was excruciatingly painful, but it only lasted a single heartbeat. Then it was over.

Kairi had stumbled into the cavern nestled behind the waterfall while fleeing from the ravenous monsters gorging themselves upon her homeworld. She watched helplessly as a gaping chasm of shadows devoured Riku in a single gulp, his smile never waverling as the corrosive darkness rendered his body into dust. Her skull vibrated with the chorus of a thousand voices, begging the Princess of Heart to stand up and turn back the tide of darkness. The frantic pleas coming from the soul of Destiny Islands overwhelmed any thoughts that Kairi could call her own and dragged her to the door with no keyhole. She couldn’t comprehend how she could possibly fend off the encroaching tsunami of Heartless, but it hadn't mattered anyway.

The last sight that graced Kairi's ocean-blue eyes was of Sora screaming her name as the door defending the heart of the world splintered and flew off its hinges. Then there was only black.

Precious few memories survived her reluctant tenancy within Sora's heart. Kairi's amnesia erected an impervious concrete wall around her heart, isolating and imprisoning her within a cage of her own making. She craved the opportunity to join Sora on his quest to drag Riku home for a well-deserved ass-whooping. She yearned to fight back against the man who sought to exploit the light in her heart and bring about the end of all worlds.

Instead, there was only an unyielding chasm of sleep that numbed Kairi's soul as if she was under anaesthetic. Flashes of unfamiliar locales cavorted across her fluttering eyelids: a thick, humid jungle heavy with the odour of apes and the booming of shotguns. An underwater palace built to escape the tribulations of the surface world, yet plagued by the unwanted influence of mankind. A clinical castle that once sung the sonata of scientific progress, but was now drenched in unearthly silence.

Sora's heart had done such an impressive job of shielding Kairi's wounded spirit that he had
unintentionally barricaded her within a fortress of solitude. Now Sora was in the same spot where Kairi herself once stood. She prayed that his desiccated heart was blanketed in the same fog of amnesia that had spared her own soul. It would be the only thing protecting it from the abyss of darkness.

The redhead threw a plush blanket around Sora's shoulders, crossing the fabric over his chest and tucking the edge under his chin. Kairi continuously reminded herself that Sora was not an infallible hero or an unbreakable legend. He carried himself with such an adamantine confidence that it was easy to revere him as an impervious warrior, but it simply wasn't true. He could throw himself into the flames until all the light in the universe were snuffed out, but Sora was no less mortal than those he had saved. The incorruptible blaze of fortitude that burned eternally within the brunette's heart had been reduced to a feeble flame, but it was still alight. Not even the ravenous ocean of darkness that claimed his body for three months could extinguish Sora's spirit.

The only thing that kept Kairi from bursting into tears at the sight of Sora's lifeless body was the triumphant grin that graced Riku's face. The brunette's unfortunate condition was only exasperated by the beating he had endured. Kairi wasn't sure he would've looked any better even if he hadn't been brought back by force. His sun-kissed complexion was replaced by a sickly pallor; his eyes surrounded by dark circles as if he hadn't slept a wink since he vanished from the face of the earth. At least there was a glimmer of hope in the rubble – Sora's body was not teetering on the brink of death, but instead was enveloped in a deep hibernation. Ienzo was ready to brave the blistering Corridors of Darkness if it meant he could study Sora's unique ailment, but the brunette was simply too frail to move.

"So, when do we stop all the lovey-dovey stuff and try just smacking him awake?"

Kairi felt a chuckle snag in her throat at Vanitas' characteristically tactless remark. Whether it was because of the foreign heart caged within his chest, or because he was safeguarding his ticket to freedom, the raven boy had barely left Sora's side. He was like a stone gargoyle affixed to the roof of a weathered cathedral. Had Kairi found herself subjected to Vanitas' persistent presence shortly after he dragged himself from the ocean and tried to take Riku's head off, she would've expected to find a knife embedded in Sora's back as soon as she looked away. Now she just found it endearing.

"I know Sora would be mad to see me blaming myself," Kairi mumbled with a morose smile. "It's just so hard to see him like this. I know what it feels like, to have your heart ripped from your body. I… guess you know what that feels like too, huh?"

Vanitas cast his yellow eyes over Sora's slumbering figure. A little colour had returned to his cheeks, turning them a soft rosy-red that peeked through the death mask. His breathing was no longer hoarse or strained, and his eyes were no longer clenched in a fitful nightmare. Kairi was undoubtedly overly attentive, but it seemed like Sora's body was beginning to recover. Vanitas sidled up to the bed that the brunette was resting upon and gave his cheek a sharp poke. His skin was cold to the touch, and his eyelids didn't even flutter in response. Sora's body was nothing more than a meat puppet with its strings cut; a mecha without its pilot. Kairi frowned and pursed her lips.

"Really?"

"Look, it was worth a try," Vanitas snorted back, crossing his arms in defiance. Kairi shook her head in disbelief and pulled herself to her feet, joints audibly popping after such a long time crouched by Sora's side.

"So, have you considered what you wanna do after this is over?" she questioned, ginger bangs falling over her eyes as she cocked her head to one side. "I can't imagine you'll be stuck in this situation for much longer."
Vanitas had been absentmindedly prodding Sora's face when Kairi posed the question. He spluttered as the inquest caught him off guard, spoken innocently yet sagging under the weight of its consequences. Kairi's sombre mood lifted a little as Vanitas struggled to compose himself. It was nice to see him expressing himself more, rather than huddling behind a mask of indifference.

"W-Well, I haven't given it much thought," Vanitas admitted, rubbing his chin in thought. "I kinda expected to have been killed by now…"

Kairi's heart ached at the raven boy's admission. The skin beneath his ears was branded with angry red imprints from his metal jaw piece, but Vanitas was a radically different person without it. Gone were the vicious edges and sharp spikes, revealing the soft, rounded jawline that had been concealed beneath the whole time. The redhead was doing everything in her power to keep a demarcation line between Sora and Vanitas. Try as she might, he only seemed to resemble his brother even more now that he was shedding his exoskeleton. If only they could get him to abandon that gaudy bodysuit...

"I suppose that's not too farfetched," Kairi conceded with a harrowed sigh. "Riku and Aqua were on the verge of duking it out to see who got to beat you up first. Had that happened the first time we met, I can't say I would've stopped them."

Vanitas' brow furrowed in offence and he opened his mouth to protest her callous words. He was barely able to exhale a single breath before a gentle hand found its perch on his shoulder, silencing his rant before it could begin.

"But that's changed now, hasn't it?" Kairi continued. "You shouldn't have hesitated to throw yourself at Ventus or bury your Keyblade in Riku's heart, yet here you are. I've seen you work alongside those who you once would've struck down without a second thought. More importantly, I've seen how your actions have changed those around you."

Vanitas wanted to spit something back at the redhead, something painfully cruel that would force her benevolent words back into her mouth. He wanted her to look at him with the disgust that he deserved, the hatred he had brought upon himself. All he could see in Kairi's eyes was compassion and understanding, and it turned his stomach inside out. Vanitas knew how to endure rage and resentment. He didn't know how to respond to kindness. He couldn't bear to meet her gaze.

"Vanitas, I know some of us still don't like you, and I can't really blame them," Kairi stated softly, her face illuminated by a genuine smile. "But if you decide to stay with us when all this is done, then I promise you'll have my support. At this point, I suspect that you have the support of more people than you think."

Vanitas had never been more grateful to be interrupted as the door to Kairi's rear creaked opened with a soft click. Aqua poked her head through the crack in the frame, afraid that she might stir Sora from his long-deserved rest. Her eyes scanned the room like a trained eagle before landing on Kairi's hand still firmly planted on Vanitas' shoulder. Aqua broke out into a knowing smile, and Vanitas turned away before she could tease him about the embarrassed flush skirting across his cheeks.

"Sorry to interrupt your little… 'chat'," Aqua whispered as if Sora would rise from his coma if someone breathed too loud. "Could I borrow Vanitas for a moment? King Mickey is almost ready to explain everything to us, but I'd like a private word with him first."

Kairi studied Aqua's face intensely, hunting for the seething resentment that the blunette had been stewing in ever since Vanitas showed his face. There were only three members of the Guardians of Light that she still hesitated to leave the black-haired Keyblade wielder alone with, and Aqua was
one of them. Instead of the animosity that she was expecting, all Kairi could see in her ocean-blue eyes was relief. Relief that Sora was finally safe in their arms, cradled in cotton blankets and protected from the nightmares of the Realm of Darkness. Relief that she no longer needed to comb the charcoal beaches for a single stray strand of chocolate-brown hair, or strain her ears for pealing laughter across the waves. Kairi returned Aqua’s reassuring smile and removed her hand from Vanitas’ shoulder.

“Sure, just keep me posted, okay?”

“Mm-hmm!”

Vanitas still wasn't thoroughly convinced that Aqua wouldn't make good on her promise to mount his head on the wall, but conceded. Looking at Sora's half-dead face was creeping him out anyway. Kairi threw him a thumbs-up as he shuffled past before returning her attention to the snoozing brunette, placing the back of her hand against his forehead. Vanitas swore he saw Sora's eyelids flutter in response to her motherly touch, but the door shut behind him before he could take a second look.

The Mysterious Tower was a rather daunting locale at the best of times, veiled by fog and illuminated only by the stars suspended in the murky sky above. The sparse sounds echoing down the vacant hallways came from the dull wooden footsteps of the animated broomsticks and candelabras. The atmosphere did nothing to quell Vanitas' nerves. The air should be ringing with the clamour of celebration now that Sora's body had been recovered. Instead, the air was heavy with uncertainty and doubt. Aqua's steel-blue hair glowed white under the moonlight streaming in from a star-shaped window as if she was crowned with a halo of diamonds. She was just as nervous as Vanitas.

"Before you ask; no. I didn't bring you out here to stab you in the back," Aqua stated bluntly. Clearly, she had picked up on Vanitas' suspicious glowering. "I actually have something to give you before we meet with Mickey. I didn't want to put a spotlight on you in front of everyone."

Vanitas muttered under his breath that she had no qualms about doing such a thing before, but Aqua turned the other cheek. She hooked a hand under the lining of her skirt and retrieved something from a pocket hidden in the fabric. The dim lighting wouldn't allow Vanitas’ eyes to focus, but the item was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. Aqua held the object out expectantly while Vanitas scrutinised it. He eventually accepted the gift, though it wasn't without an ample portion of distrust. As he turned the article over in his hand, the puzzle pieces in his head finally fell into place.

“… A Wayfinder?”

Even in the muted starlight, the angular shape of the charm was unmistakable. Five Thalassa shells arranged in a star and stitched together with ribbons, affixed to a loop of string so it could be hung around the neck. Each shell was tinted mahogany red; the sharp points dug into Vanitas' skin through his leather gloves like tiny pinpricks. He could feel the mild tingling of magic against his palm as the charm radiated feeble energy, like a lantern that had consumed the fuel that once sustained it.

“That’s right,” Aqua chirped, thankful that Vanitas had accepted her gift without retaliation. “The people of Destiny Islands make these in the shape of the Paopu fruit. They say it’s a good luck charm, that it protects those on long and dangerous voyages.”

"… Okay?” Vanitas questioned with uncertainty in his amber eyes. "But why are you giving this to me?"
“Well, you said you have no plans to stick around once this is over,” Aqua continued, crossing her arms behind her back. “I put a little of my magic into it. So as long as you and your friends carry good luck charms shaped like the Paopu fruit, nothing can ever drive you apart. You will always find your way back to each other. An unbreakable connection.”

Vanitas' eyes remained clouded with confusion. He was just as dense as his brothers.

"If you ever change your mind, the magic in that Wayfinder will lead you home," Aqua explained patiently. "No matter how far your journey takes you, the ties between our hearts will never falter. Our family is a little... 'unorthodox', but there will always be a place for you here if you want there to be."

Vanitas found himself enveloped in a suffocating hug before he could respond to Aqua's poetic offering. His arm was forced flat against his chest as Aqua swept him into her arms, daintily resting her chin on the crown of his head. His fist was still clenched around the pointed spires of the Wayfinder that was now pressed against his chest. Every muscle in Vanitas' body tensed at the unannounced physical contact, but his mind was so entrenched in shock that he couldn't push himself away.

“I’m sorry I judged you so unfairly,” Aqua whispered, rubbing Vanitas’ back in circular motions in an attempt to defuse his tension. "I hope that one day, I can earn your forgiveness."

Vanitas wanted nothing more than to plant his palms against Aqua's chest and shove her to the floor. He wanted to toss her gaudy keepsake back in her face and tell her to get lost. He wanted to discard those words of forgiveness and charity and go back to being a hateful, unfeeling monster. He just… couldn't. He couldn't bring himself to pull away from the comforting embrace he was swaddled in. Vanitas could only comprehend the notion of laying his hands on someone to inflict pain, to wrap his fingers around their neck and snap the bones beneath the skin. The soft cheek resting on his scalp and flattening the unruly spikes of hair; the gentle circling of the hand on his back. Vanitas could no longer trust his memories, but he felt like he was being comforted for the first time in his life.

As the uneasy tension slowly liberated itself from his body, Vanitas leaned into Aqua's embrace and allowed his eyes to slip shut.

Vanitas would never allow his Mom to embrace him in such a vulnerable manner in front of his friends. She had once planted a kiss on his cheek as he barreled out the front door of their seaside home, stomach full of bacon and eggs and exploding with a zest for life. A hand lassoed itself around Vanitas' arm as he leapt from the deck into the miles of white sand, smooching his face before he could wriggle free. It took Riku, Tidus and Wakka a whole week before they stopped calling him 'momma's boy' every time they saw him. He was confident that his Mom knew exactly what she was doing. The mischievous twinkle in her ocean-blue eyes was proof of that.

For all Vanitas loudly protested any time his Mom dragged a display of affection from him in public, his heart soared with glee whenever she hugged him tight as if he was the centre of her entire world. Every day he would burst into the house to find her in the kitchen, elbow-deep in some new and exotic dish that may or may not be edible. She would drop everything to ruffle his hair and listen to him rant about his day as if reciting a novel of epic proportions. Vanitas knew his Mom was the best Mom on the islands. She was such a good parent that his Dad didn't even need to stick around! His Mom did the work of two people, and he dared anyone to try and beat her at it.

It was with a heavy heart that he struggled against her grip and slipped out of her hold, rejecting
her embrace for the first time.

"C'mon Mom, I'm fourteen now!" Vanitas declared, puffing out his chest with bravado. "Riku says that teenagers don't need hugs from their moms!"

Vanitas' Mom sighed and shook her head in exasperation. He had denounced her affections at least a dozen times already, asserting that he was far too old and mature to receive her love. It never lasted long. She dreaded the day when he would grow out of his youthful innocence, exchanging hugs with his old mother for the final time. Why did children have to grow up so fast?

"Riku says a lot of things to sound tougher than he is," she chuckled, relenting to Vanitas' boasting. "I just worry about you going out on that raft. There's supposed to be a nasty storm tonight..."

“We weren’t gonna go out on the raft tonight anyway,” Vanitas huffed, his cheeks puffing out in outrage. “Besides, I almost beat Riku at sparring today! I’m gonna go out there and explore new islands, beat up some pirates, maybe even bring back some gold doubloons! You’ll see, I’ll make you proud!”

“Aww, you already make me proud, Vanitas Sora,” Sora’s Mom chuckled, lifting up his bangs and planting a gentle kiss on his forehead. “I’ll call you when dinner’s ready, okay? Just promise me that you’ll be back home in time for dinner.”

“Eww,” Vanitas Sora replied, acting disgusted but unable to keep the cheeky grin off his face. “Yes, Mom.”

Sora’s Mom ushered him upstairs so he could change into his pyjamas. The smile she wore on her face slipped away as he vanished up the staircase, his pounding footsteps shaking the aged floorboards. He was so much like his father. She wasn’t sure if that was something to be celebrated. She turned back to the stove and lifted a glass lid off a pot, revealing the bubbling stew brewing inside. It didn’t matter how much practice she got – Sora’s Mom was a pretty mediocre chef. Thankfully, Sora had a pretty mediocre palate and wolfed down anything put in front of him.

She worried about him sometimes. Every day that passed was another day that Sora seemed to age before her eyes, blossoming into a strapping young man yet growing more and more distant. One week he was building a raft to sail through uncharted waters, and the next he was constructing a rocket to the stars. As a mother, it was all she could do to support her son in his infinite escapades, ready to brush the dirt from his clothes and kiss his boo-boos. Sora revered Riku like the older brother he never had, but she was grateful that the spark of childhood innocence was still alight in his heart.

Shaking her head, she stirred her stew with a crooked wooden spoon, wincing as a crack of thunder shook the house at its foundations. Thank God for the storm. If it hadn’t been for the raging maelstrom overhead, Sora would probably be off on that wooden dinghy by now. The poor weather was a godsend as long as it kept him within arms reach. Hopefully, the raft would be destroyed by a flash of lightning. Sora would be devastated, but he would understand when he was older.

Unfortunately for both of them, Sora never did make it home in time for dinner. Destiny Islands
was devoured by the Heartless, lost to the bottomless pit of darkness at the end of the world. Even after its heart was restored following Ansem's defeat, the kitchen remained barren. No beds were slept in, no windows opened to allow fresh air into the dusty house, no smell of questionable cooking, and no hugs or kisses to make the pain go away.

Sora never saw his mother again.

“Sora, come down! Dinner’s ready!”

“… Sora?”

Vanitas gasped and thrust his arms against Aqua as hard as he could, almost sending her careening through the door between them and Sora’s slumbering body. The spines of the Wayfinder burrowed into his palm, threatening to draw pearls of crimson blood. His heart screamed in overwhelming agony as if drowning in an ocean of grief. He swore he was dying, but the sweet release of death never came. His head felt like it was being crushed in a vice, and his eyes burned as salty tears left trails down his cheeks. Vanitas scrubbed at his face, banishing the moisture and aggravating his skin until he was left with a ruby-red blush.

“Vanitas? Hey, what’s wrong?” Aqua probed in shock as the black-haired Keyblade wielder seemed to break down before her. She was hoping to draw out some of his stifled emotions, but not like this! She reached out a hand to comfort him, to remind him of her stabilising presence. He slapped it away.

“I’m fine. I just want this all to be done.”

Vanitas stormed down the hallway towards Yen Sid’s office before Aqua could speak another word. If the Guardians of Light were a circus, then he was their star clown. He had allowed himself to fall into their trap, dropping his guard and letting them draw too close to his shrivelled half-heart. Now Vanitas understood why they never shut up about the power of friendship. The warm feeling that their companionship had given him was intoxicating, lulling him into a false sense of security and leaving his emotions unguarded. Xehanort was a delusional megalomaniac, but he was right about one thing: his feelings were better left buried six feet under.

Damn it, why was having a heart so frustrating?! Why did it have to hurt so much?

Vanitas was ready to throw the doors to Yen Sid’s office right off their hinges until he realised that the Wayfinder was still clenched in his palm. The magic radiating from the charm raced through his veins like streams of acid. He should lob it out a window, leaving it to the mercy of whatever lay below the fields of fog surrounding the tower. Vanitas just couldn’t pry his fingers away from the grooves and ridges of the Thalassa shells, as if his heart and mind were at war. He knew that his memories were fucked up, that the woman with long brown hair and no face was Sora’s mother and not his own. His heart believed that she was the woman who raised him, and it was grieving for a family that was never his. Vanitas longed to rip his beating heart out of his chest and toss it out the window along with the Wayfinder.

Snarling in frustration, he shoved the Wayfinder into his pocket and stormed into the office. He had shown the Guardians of Light more patience than they deserved. Now it was time to play by his rules.
Mickey always had a tough time allowing himself to feel optimistic. After the innumerable times he had pruned back the members of Organization XIII only for them to sprout anew like the heads of the hydra, his sense of foreboding was ingrained into his brain. The feeling of disappointment every time the Heartless reared their ugly heads after swearing they had been exterminated bore heavily on his heart. The King was consumed by the urge to look over his shoulder, fearing that any threat he banished would rise from the ashes if he ever averted his gaze.

Mickey begged his heart to permit him a moment of reprieve from his anxiety. Sora was curled up in a warm bed for the first time in months, and Kairi hadn't left his side for fear he would dissolve into dust. Vanitas was finally cooperating and had even battled alongside Aqua and Riku instead of opposing them. Ventus, Roxas and Xion were readily available, no longer imprisoned in the brunette's heart. The stars had aligned and, for once in his life, it felt like everything was going to be okay.

"You must cease your worrying at once," Yen Sid droned, eyes closed in meditation. "Take a page from Sora's book. He's awfully laidback about his precarious situation."

"Sora is so laidback that he's practically horizontal," Mickey replied with a deadpan expression. "I'm not sure this is the time for that."

"Actually, what exactly is this 'time' for?"

Mickey had been so absorbed in his fretting that he'd almost forgotten the other three people in the room. The trio had jumped to attention when the King broke the news that Sora's body had been recovered, ready to leap into action and do whatever was required of them. But when Ventus, Roxas and Xion stormed the Mysterious Tower to find that they were the only ones who had been summoned, their elation metamorphosed into confusion. Sure, it was nigh impossible to squeeze the entire platoon into Yen Sid's study without knocking over a few bookcases, but… where was everyone else?

"When Vanitas gets here, I'll tell you everything," Mickey promised. "You three have the closest connection to Sora's heart. We won't be able to do this without you."

"At least someone finally recognises that," Roxas replied, his usual stony frown spread across his face. "I can't count the number of times we told everyone that we heard Sora's voice in our dreams. It shouldn't have gone this far in the first place."

"I can count them," Xion stated, matching his deadpan expression. "It was three times."

"That's still two times too many!"

"C'mon guys, let's not argue over this," Ventus pleaded, his eyes overflowing with raw emotion that Roxas was impervious to. "It doesn't matter what happened before. We need to focus on what's happening right now! Besides, I still have my lifetime pass to Disney Town! I propose a family vacation, just the five of us. I feel like we need it at this point."

"You talk like Vanitas is gonna stick around," Roxas grumbled. "Besides, aren't you like thirty years old now? Isn't hanging out with people half your age a sign of a midlife crisis?"

Xion coughed and spluttered while trying to choke back laughter as Ventus' jaw dropped to the floor. The blond passed through all five stages of grief at once as his age gap sunk into his mind. Roxas looked rather pleased with himself but punched his twin lightly on the shoulder to show he was joking. Mickey shook his head as Ventus' bottom lip quivered miserably, but the double doors of the study being thrown open commanded all of his attention. Vanitas stormed into the room like a
rampant tornado, all evidence of his cautious optimism substituted by a primal rage. For a moment, Ventus feared that Xehanort had somehow wrenched back control of Vanitas' heart from beyond the grave.

"I'm here," Vanitas growled as the doors slammed shut behind him, "and I'm ready for an explanation. It had better be good."

"Hey, are you alright?" Ventus tentatively probed, wondering what could've snipped Vanitas' fuse so short.

"I don't want to talk about me," Vanitas snapped back. His voice crackled with dangerous power as if he was struggling to hold himself back. "I only want to talk about Sora. And where the hell is everyone else anyway?!"

“Actually, everyone we need is right here!” Mickey exclaimed, gesturing at the three stunned Keyblade wielders. “Well, I guess I should probably start explaining.”

Standing before the three Guardians of Light, the mouse king, and the noble wizard left Vanitas feeling like he was at an intervention. The only thing keeping him from launching himself out the nearest window was the mirrored expressions of confusion painted on the faces of his 'siblings'. Yen Sid seemed content to remain in silence, fingers crossed and eyes closed as if hovering on the edge of sleep. Vanitas didn’t doubt that the wizard was paying attention to every word.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” Mickey continued, undeterred by the unsure looks of those around him. “The initial plan was to travel to some of the worlds that Sora’s heart is connected to, right?”

Vanitas forcefully crossed his arms and hurled a distrusting glower at the King. He wanted answers, not more questions!

“Sure it was,” he harrumphed. “Not that it went anywhere. We still have no idea what happened to Sora in those three months.”

“That’s true. It sure would’ve been nice to find out…” Mickey mused. “It’s okay, though. There was another purpose that it fulfilled pretty well! You see, losing tiny pieces of your heart along the way isn’t that uncommon. In fact, it doesn’t even have to be a bad thing!”

Vanitas didn’t understand how the irritating rat could say something so coldhearted with such a big smile on his face. There wasn’t any angle he could observe his situation from that could convince him that this “wasn’t a bad thing”. Still, Vanitas’ lust for knowledge far outweighed his desire for revenge, and he reluctantly bit his tongue. Mickey was either unaware of the black-haired boy’s sparkling anger or simply didn’t care, and continued his passionate monologue.

“Every time two hearts come together, it’s inevitable for a little portion of each soul to be left behind,” he continued, now deeply invested in his soliloquy. “It keeps us connected. Even across the vast expanse of space, through the depths of the Realm of Darkness, or whatever awaits us after we die. A piece of ourselves remains alive inside those whose hearts we touched.”

Mickey turned his attention back to the trio who were quietly absorbing his words. Roxas was casually leaning against the edge of a bookshelf. Xion’s sapphire-blue eyes were open wide and intently focused as if clinging to every word. Ventus’ self-pity had been submerged in uncertainty as he chewed on his lower lip.

"You three have experienced this already," Mickey smiled warmly. "How do you think your hearts continued beating after Sora took you under his wing? It wasn't just his own strength that kept you
going, though it certainly helped. The chains that bind your souls to those of your loved ones will outlive any physical contact."

"Hmm..." Roxas pondered, perking up slightly as the King's words stirred some long-forgotten memories. "After I rejoined with Sora, or I was supposed to at least, I could still remember the faces of all my friends. Hayner, Pence, Olette... I could hear their voices every time they spoke to Sora. It... hurt a lot. They were so close, but I couldn't reach them no matter how hard I tried."

"I can attest to that!" Ventus agreed, throwing one arm around Roxas' shoulders before he could fall into a pit of despair. "I always knew I could sense Aqua and Terra by my side while I was asleep. I couldn't see them or feel them, but there were there. I just knew it!"

"You're not far from the truth!" Mickey agreed wholeheartedly. "Aqua and Terra would've left little fragments of themselves within you. The combined light of everyone you've crossed paths with will always triumph over darkness. Unfortunately, that also explains why Sora was so weakened when he reached out to Vanitas."

Sora wouldn't lie and claim that he was the smartest member of the Guardians of Light. Heck, he wasn't even the smartest person in the room! He tended to zone out whenever the conversation turned to the abstract nature of hearts and light anyway. It was like reading a poorly-written fanfiction and expecting to understand any of the character motivations. He scratched the crown of his scalp as if the spiralling thoughts inside his mind would burst through his skull. How exactly had they gone from treating his fractured heart as the root of all his problems, to tossing it aside as if it no longer mattered?

"You know," he began, half to himself and half to the other occupants of the study, "There was something odd about what happened before Vanitas picked me up. I remember a faint spark of light, barely brighter than a firefly. I always assumed that the light was Vanitas responding to my cries for help, but I also remember how every star in the sky lit up around me. It was like I was in the centre of a supernova."

Mickey contemplated Sora's recollection, squinting his black eyes and rubbing his chin in thought.

"Well, that lines up with everything we understand about this," he eventually stated. "Maybe those bursts of light were the hearts of everyone you've met reaching out to you."

Sora wasn't wholly convinced by Mickey's theory. If that was the case, then why hadn't he been plucked from the abyss sooner? If Ventus, Roxas and Xion all recalled hearing his wailing in their dreams, then why hadn't one of them taken him into their arms? Out of everyone that Sora had ever met, why did it take one of his worst enemies to close the distance and save him from his fate?

"That's not important right now," Mickey said as if acutely aware of the concerns rooting themselves into Sora's brain. "Exposing Sora to the people and places that he had grown attached to would reignite the light within his heart. It wouldn't matter if we never discovered what became of the rest of his soul. Those reforged connections would be more than enough to empower him. We could get his heart into a Replica body, and we'd be in the clear! Well. That was the plan, anyway. Ultimately, the path we chose to walk was founded in logic but paved with misconceptions."

"Could we have it in less poetic terms?" Vanitas demanded, raising a single eyebrow. Mickey blinked in surprise before remembering that he wasn't speaking to an academic.

“R-Right, sorry,” he apologised with a meek smile. “Because your heart is composed of pure darkness, it will do everything in its power to fill the void where Ventus’ light once dwelled. Reinforcing Sora’s connections without influencing yours will empower what light remains in his
heart long enough for us to prepare a Replica. It’s entirely possible for your darkness to engulf his declining light, which is the fate that Roxas and Xion were intended to meet. The three months spent wandering the Ocean Between cut Sora off from the chain of memories that kept him going long after his heart was fractured.”

“Are you saying that this all could’ve been avoided if we had found him sooner?!?” Xion exclaimed in horror. “All this time dedicated to reuniting the pieces of Sora’s heart would’ve never been necessary!”

“I mean, I guess so…” Mickey reluctantly admitted. “The only reason that we tracked down the fragments of his heart is because the knots tethering him to his loved ones have come undone…”

Mickey had anticipated some level of apprehension towards the enigma surrounding Sora’s whereabouts. What he hadn’t anticipated was the wave of crestfallen expressions that worms themselves across the faces of the Keyblade wielders. Every single member of the Guardians of Light had blamed themselves for Sora's disappearance at some point, and Mickey was no exception. The information he had corroborated proved without a doubt that there was no one person to blame for the brunette's untimely disappearance. Somehow, it had only succeeded in digging the trench deeper.

“Hey, don’t look so glum!” Mickey insisted, trying to lighten the mood before the Keyblade wielders drowned in their misery. “I do have some good news! The reason why we stopped trying to reconnect Sora with his memories wasn’t just because of Vanitas. It was also because we traced the pieces of Sora’s heart that had gone astray! We found them!”

Vanitas’ yellow eyes had been glued to the floor in front of his feet as the gravity of Sora’s situation tried to drag him into the earth. His ears pricked up as the King tried to turn the situation around, just in time to catch the nervous smile on Mickey’s face. They had… found Sora’s heart?

“Wait a minute, you found Sora’s heart?!” Vanitas bellowed, shocking the other Keyblade wielders out of their reverie. “Why didn’t you say so sooner?!”

“Because a complete heart is no good without a body to anchor it to,” Mickey stated calmly. Vanitas’ erratic emotions were like a roller coaster with no exit. He was passionate, but it clouded his judgement. “Besides, I think you already have an inkling as to where the other pieces ended up.”

Vanitas gave the King a blank look. Maybe he had given the black-haired Keyblade wielder too much credit.

“They’re all here,” Mickey insisted, gesturing towards Ventus, Roxas and Xion. “There isn’t enough time in the universe to count those who owe Sora their lives, but those born from his soul carry the most significant fragments. That’s why they heard his voice in their dreams. That’s why Roxas and Xion defied the laws of nature and existed alongside their Somebody. That’s why Ventus could return to his body, despite never regaining his lost darkness. They’ve been here this whole time. We were so focused on the forest that we were unable to see the trees.”

Mickey took Vanitas’ hand while he was petrified in stunned silence and laid it on top of Ventus’. They were joined by Roxas and Xion until all four siblings were connected. Vanitas felt a jolt of electricity shoot up his arm as if his heart had skipped a beat at the contact. Sora's heart had been pounding with agitation in his chest the entire time, but the brunette was now uncharacteristically silent.

“In a sense, all the little shards of Sora’s heart did what they were supposed to do,” Mickey stated, relief saturating every word as the truth was finally lifted from his shoulders. “They led him back
home. Sure, this might not have been the manner that we expected, but we got a bonus. We got you.”

Vanitas’ mind flipped through every emotion on the spectrum like a kaleidoscope, his thoughts racing at the speed of light. He imagined the mirrored expressions on the faces of his siblings, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from their overlapping hands. Could it be true? Was this the first time that every misplaced splinter of Sora’s heart had come together like the pieces of a mosaic slotting into place? Was this how it felt to... belong? Had Sora screamed into a featureless void, begging for anyone to hear his voice, only to lead himself back home?

Wait… screaming into the void?

“So this is all your fault!”

Vanitas yanked his hand out from under the pile, severing the momentary connection before it could worm its way into his heart. His siblings recoiled as if he had struck them, staring at him in bewilderment. The pinpricks of rage building in Vanitas’ soul grew into sword wounds. How could they look at him with such innocent expressions? Were they trying to deceive him? Trying to wriggle out of the consequences of their actions? Or were they really that stupid?!

“I don’t even like Sora, but you guys are supposed to be his friends! All you’ve done is take, take, take! Is everybody content to let him hand out pieces of himself to anyone who asks? Is the crux of ‘being a hero’ to be milked for all he’s worth until nothing is left?!”

The two boys that Mickey had been the most concerned about were Vanitas and Roxas. Roxas was fiercely protective of his friends and was the most vocally outraged when their search party abandoned their posts. His humourless expression and stern tone of voice belied his unequivocal compassion and thirst for justice. If the blond could figure out how to wield three Keyblades at once, he probably would. Vanitas was just going to oppose anything he presented, regardless of the truth in his words. Mickey never imagined the ex-Seeker of Darkness becoming enraged in defence of Sora. He spoke as if he loathed his brother, but the spark of indignity in his yellow eyes would not glow so brightly if that were true.

“You’re joking, right?!?” Roxas roared with poison on his tongue. "Don't you dare try and spin this on us! By your very own logic, you've taken just as much of Sora as anyone else!"

“Exactly! That's why I'm so pissed off!” Vanitas spat back. "There's no reason for it to be just us four here! Whether we hold the final pieces of Sora's heart or not, the others deserve to know the truth! Admit it, you've cornered us because you want to take them back, right?"

It took a moment for Mickey to realise that the accusation had been hurled at him, rather than Roxas. The unfiltered animosity welling up in Vanitas’ stare shattered his well-organised thoughts, hours of study and reflection ripped to shreds in a single instant. The King knew where his motives lay, but the interrogation sprouted buds of doubt within his brain.

"Not necessarily," he insisted. "There isn't some ulterior motive behind everything I do! ... That is to say, it sure would be the ideal outcome…"

“And there it is, the kick to the nuts,” Vanitas growled. “These three all have people that care about them. They have their own bonds that will keep their hearts beating, even without Sora’s light. But what about me?! I don’t have anybody like that! My heart has never had its own light because Ventus kept it all for himself! If you take away the part of Sora that lives within me, I'll just disappear!”
Ventus winced as if Vanitas had slapped him across the face without ever raising his hand. The pain embedded in his sky-blue eyes almost convinced Vanitas to rescind his accusations, but he was done playing the fool. He refused to allow his voice to be silenced any longer.

“T-That’s not true!” Ventus protested, his voice cracking slightly. “I care about yo-”

"You can shut your mouth," Vanitas snarled, hushing Ventus before he could finish his thought. "You didn’t even rescue Sora after you heard him calling for help. Why would you ever lift a finger for me? Not once has my name come up during this fiasco. It's always been about Sora! Well, I'm sick of it!"

Vanitas' thoughts were raging like a typhoon over Port Royal, but there was one thing he was sure of. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and the Guardians of Light. His mind was overwhelmed with the revelations that had piled upon him, and he needed to let his heart settle. He ached to go somewhere far away - somewhere he could shove his unwanted cravings for companionship into a box and bury it so it could never be found. Vanitas couldn't stand to look at their faces, streaked with pity and regret that he didn't deserve.

“Wait, Sora!” Xion begged as he almost ploughed through the doorway and out of sight. "Please, don't let Vanitas do this to you!"

Sora's gloved fingertips were inches from the door when he paused in his tracks. Vanitas fought to drag him across the threshold with all the force of an enraged Darkside, but he kept his feet glued in place. The black-haired Keyblade wielder's emotions were so powerful that Sora struggled to hear his own thoughts above the booming thunder in his heart. Was this how the others felt while trapped inside his soul, smothered by his light that eclipsed everything in its path?

There were many words he could use to describe Vanitas. Most couldn't be repeated in polite company. But for the first time since Sora was plucked from the depths of darkness by one of his greatest enemies, he felt like Vanitas had a point.

Xehanort once told him that his heart was a prison. Sora finally understood what he meant, but he no longer knew on which side of the bars he stood.

"Sorry, guys," Sora mumbled. "I need some time to process this too."

With an air of absolute finality, he pushed through the heavy doors and noiselessly slid them shut behind him.

If Vanitas could muster the willpower, there were two worlds that held the dubious award of being named his 'homeworld'. Not counting Destiny Islands, of course. He wasn’t sure where he stood with them anymore.

The first was the Realm of Darkness, although it was a little on the nose. Of every godforsaken wasteland the black-haired Keyblade wielder had dragged himself through, it was the world that most closely resembled his true nature. His ethereal yellow eyes and ebony-black hair wouldn't be out of place among the Heartless that still clung to their pathetic existence. Vanitas had considered absconding to the abyss, but he'd be damned if he found himself there again. He'd filled his quota of darkness for the rest of his life.

The second was the Keyblade Graveyard. Vanitas’ memories of the parched desert left a bitter taste
on his tongue, but it was the closest thing to a birthplace that he had. The arid sand witnessed the 
moment that Xehanort found him stumbling around the badlands with no name and someone else's 
face. It was also where destiny intended Vanitas to meet his demise at the hands of Sora and Ventus. 
It was only fitting that the two who created him would be the two to end him. Not that this ever came 
to pass. Fate had a wicked sense of humour, and Vanitas seemed to be the butt of every joke.

Vanitas snorted and scrubbed the sand from his eyes before the grit embedded itself under his skin. 
Fine particles of dust wormed into every fold of skin, just as inescapable as his turbulent past. No 
solace resided beneath the scalding sun, but it was almost comforting. It wasn't too long ago that 
Vanitas despised the light for how it pierced the hazy fog surrounding his heart and exposed his 
secrets for the world to see. There was no hiding from the truth under its blazing stare. Something 
had changed inside his heart, and he finally understood the appeal. The darkness offered a sanctuary 
from the pain that was married to his soul, but no deceit could be found in the light.

When all of this started, back when I only had Ansem to worry about, I was taught that dark is evil 
and light is good. I wish the world were really that black and white. Life would be a lot simpler.

Vanitas had expected Sora to fight him tooth and nail as he fled from the Mysterious Tower, 
scattering the animated broomsticks unlucky enough to be caught in his path. His chest thrummed 
with apprehension as if his soul was outgrowing his body. As if his ribs would splinter and shatter at 
the slightest movement. The opposition never came. Even the ephemeral train heeded his call and 
allowed him aboard its carriage, despite lacking the purity of heart needed to command the 
locomotive. It wasn't just that Sora was allowing him to leave. It felt like the brunette was an active 
participant, abetting him in his flight from the Guardians of Light. Vanitas expected a Keyblade to be 
jammed into his spine at any moment, even after the train departed the station and crossed the endless 
void of fog. It all just felt too easy.

Sora wasn't as taken aback by the ease with which he slipped away from his friends. The forlorn 
expressions on the faces of his siblings weren't just because Vanitas had lashed out at them, though it 
probably didn't help. No, their shared misery came from a deep-rooted understanding that went 
beyond the boundaries of family. All five members of their unconventional tribe knew how it felt to 
have their world flipped upside down and inside out, the very fabric of reality distorting into 
something unrecognisable. Ventus had accepted it as his role in the universe, deciding that the 
happiness outweighed the consequences. Roxas had struggled against it, determined to rip free of a 
destiny woven long before he took his first breath. Xion had turned it to her advantage, flipping the 
script on those who sought to manipulate her. Sora had brushed it off with a carefree smile and faced 
every day as it came.

Vanitas… well, Vanitas was still processing it.

The crunching of dirt from rapidly approaching footsteps filled the stagnant air behind him. Both 
Sora and Vanitas felt their conjoined hearts lurch as their stalkers grew ever closer, but neither turned 
to face them. They raised their face up to the sky and closed their eyes, feeling the sun's warm kiss 
on their cheeks. It wasn't just the absence of the metal chin guard that had lifted a weight off their 
shoulders. It was the knowledge that their plight was about to draw to a painstaking close. It was the 
knowledge that for once in their lives, the two were on the same page. It wouldn't matter how hard 
they had to fight for their freedom – the weight of the world was lighter when carried on two sets of 
shoulders.

Ventus had somehow always suspected that it would come to this. The Keyblade Graveyard was 
more than just a burial ground for ancient Keyblade wielders. It was the site of his death. The dusty, 
fractured ground had silently watched as he turned against his best friends, spurred on by Vanitas' 
indomitable will and the rapturous joy of the \( \chi \)-blade in his right hand. It was where Terra fell to
darkness, and where Xehanort cleaved their friendship apart as if it was nothing. The ghosts of the past haunted the arid plain, and the ghosts of his own failures lingered with them.

How poetic that Vanitas would choose such a place to run away to. The place where everything began would be the place where everything ended.

“There he is!” Roxas bellowed, his anger overwhelming any desire to mask their approach. “Now can we beat him up?!”

“You know, this time I'm not going to stop you,” Xion remarked, panting as the intolerable heat smothered everything caught in its rays. “We may need to at this point.”

Once it became apparent that Vanitas was not coming back, there was very nearly a small army of Keyblade wielders out for his blood. Roxas didn’t know how he managed to get off the solitary island that the Mysterious Tower called its own, and he didn’t care for the finer details. As far as he was concerned, Vanitas had taken Sora hostage. Roxas’ heart was crushed to a bloody pulp. For a moment, he had seen past the abrasive and confrontational façade that Vanitas had constructed around himself. He had been in that position once before, donning a mask of confidence as fragile as porcelain. Roxas looked at Vanitas and saw a reflection of himself. They could've been so close, and yet…

“Damnit all!” Roxas spat as his swelling anger turned inwards. "Why did things have to turn out this way?!”

"I don't know, but I'm not giving up!” Ventus gasped for breath, sprinting alongside his siblings as Vanitas’ silhouette drew closer. “I know you won’t either!”

Aqua and Riku had flipped their lids when the trio proclaimed that they would be going after Vanitas alone. The announcement that the ex-Seeker of Darkness had slipped through their fingers hit so much harder now that Vanitas had wriggled his way into their hearts. He had put so much effort into proving himself worthy of a second chance, only to throw it all away. It just didn't make sense. Ventus almost agreed with them, but the wistful look on Sora's face as he gently clicked the doors of Yen Sid's study closed spoke louder than any screaming or yelling. It was nearly impossible to believe, but it didn't seem like Sora had gone unwillingly.

The three slowed in their rampage as they came within striking distance of Vanitas, who hadn't so much as flinched in response to their presence. The percussive crunching of sand stalled as Ventus, Roxas and Xion stood before him, gasping for breath yet without exhaustion in their eyes. Seeing his brother's form silhouetted against the blinding desert sun took the blond back to the day he had fallen in this very spot. The day that Sora had begged Vanitas to defy his own death, and he had refused. The day he decided that being consumed by shadows was the lesser of two evils.

Ventus wasn’t going to let Vanitas make the same mistake twice. This time, he was coming home.

"… Are you ready for this?" Sora whispered. The endless expanse of thirsty earth was eerily silent without the pounding of footsteps. He could almost hear the metallic shrieking of Keyblades grinding against each other as if standing in the centre of a battlefield.

“… No,” Vanitas admitted. His heart was fraught with uncertainty, wracked with self-doubt and plagued by deceit. How could he face his brother if he wasn’t yet ready to face himself?

The edges of his mouth curled upwards slightly as Sora offered a small smile in return.

“That’s okay. Me neither.”
Before he could talk himself out of it, Sora turned to face his fears. The air around them stood still as if time itself had paused to witness the inevitable clash. The clattering of rusty Keychains against their discarded Keyblades were like wind chimes swaying in the breeze. Even the rhythmic drumming of Sora’s heartbeat as blood rushed through his veins felt distant and muffled. It didn’t matter which set of identical blue eyes he locked on to. The trepidation blazing in each pair turned his blood to ice. They were four dark figures standing in an infinite expanse of sweltering sand, backlit by the fiery halo of the desert sun.

Sora licked his lips, feeling as if the sand has sucked all the moisture out of his body. He clenched his left hand, and he could sense Vanitas clenching his right. With a deep breath and a shaky heart, Sora shattered the uncomfortable silence that had fallen across the Keyblade Graveyard.

“Hi.”

“Hi?!” Roxas stammered as if all the air from his lungs had escaped into the atmosphere. “How are you so calm?!”

Sora stifled a chuckle at Roxas’ outburst. The blond was often perceived as stoic and aloof by those who hadn't been blessed by his company. Anyone able to get more than a sentence out of the reserved Nobody knew that this couldn't be further from the truth.

“Sorry,” he apologised, meekly rubbing the back of his head. “I didn’t know what to say. I never thought I’d be facing you all like this.”

The uneasy silence persisted as the trio continued to stare Sora down. His awkward charm was usually enough to defuse even the most volatile situation, but his many siblings were immune to it. Ventus could see how his wide smile didn’t reach his eyes. His golden orbs seemed to gleam under the Sahara sun, and they were awash with anxiety.

"Sora," Ventus stated with an uncharacteristic frown. "You didn't stop Vanitas from leaving."

Ventus' words were less of a question and more of a statement. There was no denying the conflicted emotions that had dug their thorns into Sora's heart like the vines of the Enchanted Dominion. That he was holding his ground and not begging his friends to strike down his kidnapper was proof enough. Sora's goofy smile slipped from his face, and his expression hardened to match his determination. Ventus wasn’t sure if he should feel proud that he had anticipated his little brother's mindset, or concerned that his instincts were right.

"You know," Sora began with a weighty sigh, "I still remember the first time I saw Vanitas' face. At the time, I didn't think much of it. Ventus and Roxas look the same. Xion and Kairi look the same. The universe is too big for there to be only one person who looks like me."

Ventus and Roxas exchanged pained expressions. They quickly looked away.

"Really, I should've been worried," Sora continued. "Not that Vanitas looks like me, but that it seemed so natural. If you think about it, our lives are pretty messed up. The only reason that we've avoided an existential crisis is because we've had time to process things. Vanitas never got that."

Sora could feel his chest tightening with every word that passed his lips. Not from his own apprehension, but from the heart that thumped alongside his.

"He's never had a chance to think about what he wants from his life. Even throughout this whole crusade, it's only ever been about me. I want Vanitas to think of himself without first thinking of me, and I know he wants that too. I'm the source of all his problems. Honestly, this is the least I can do."
"You always take responsibility for everyone else's problems," Xion said with a sad smile. The personality trait was the reason why Sora was so dearly beloved. It was also the reason why he found himself embroiled in so many wars. "But of all the places to go, why here?"

She gestured out at the barren desert. The thousands of Keyblades embedded into the parched earth were like tombstones marking the spot where their masters met their journey's end. The only moisture that had even fallen on the desiccated landscape was the blood of those who fought over the $\chi$-blade, their bones turned to dust and names lost to the wind.

"I know it’s a little morbid, but this is the only place that’ll work," Sora insisted. "Do you remember? This is the last place where Kingdom Hearts was summoned, at least in the Realm of Light."

"I try not to," Roxas muttered. The legacy of the icy-blue moon hung over his shoulder like the inescapable call of death. Organization XIII dedicated their existence to manifesting the heart of all hearts, praying that it would return their souls. Roxas had even been among their ranks, ignorant that his heart still beat within his Somebody. Xehanort attempted to control it to bring about the end of all worlds. Kingdom Hearts was both the question and the answer, the beginning and the end.

"There's still a lot about hearts that I don't understand," Sora pensively admitted. "But there's one thing that everyone keeps telling me. 'The brightest light shines in the deepest darkness.' A heart can’t survive without light, and it can’t survive without darkness. Vanitas and I can’t stay fused like this for much longer, but we’re also keeping each other alive. That ends now."

Sora ended his soliloquy by summoning the Kingdom Key and Void Gear into his hands. A flurry of lights cascaded across the graveyard as Ventus, Roxas and Xion conjured their own Keyblades in retaliation. Ventus’ heart dropped at the sight of the two magnificent weapons now turned against him. His battle sense told him to unleash a Sonic Blade and dart at Sora before he had to chance to strike, but his hesitation was too immense to overcome. Roxas and Xion were equally frozen to the spot, ready to defend themselves but unable to make the first move. Ventus expected to feel a rush of wind as Sora hurled himself at the three people standing between him and his goal, but he didn’t take a single step forward. The ferocity in his golden eyes would’ve shaken the most powerful Heartless to its core.

"I’m not going to let you save me if it means sacrificing Vanitas in the process!" Sora proclaimed, his voice carrying across the empty wasteland. "He needs a light of his own, and there’s only one way to get it!"

Xion squinted as the sun suddenly blossomed to blinding proportions. She removed one hand from her own Kingdom Key to protect her eyes from the glare, but it wasn't necessary. A dark shadow fell across the Keyblade Graveyard as an acre of angry grey stormclouds descended upon the four. Her bare legs were covered with goosebumps as the temperature dropped and the wind picked up as if a hurricane had been born from thin air. The chains attached to the thousands of Keyblades were almost torn from their hilts as the gale threatened to pull them into the sky. The wind was somehow converging into a single spot right above Sora's form.

“Sora! Stop!”

Both Sora and Vanitas had lost any interest in listening to reason. Without any further thoughts of the consequences, the two thrust their Keyblades into the air pointing towards the sun. The encroaching storm clouds were on the verge of swallowing the star, the last few rays of ephemeral light illuminating the earth below. They were no longer willing to scream into the void and beg for help.

This time, they were going to demand help, and the light would have no choice but to obey.
As suddenly as the stormclouds had conquered the sky, they were repelled by a shockwave that parted the tide and allowed beams of light to stream through once more. Instead of the scorching, searing rays of the unforgiving desert sun, the light trickling down from the sky was a frosty blue.
The metal of the forgotten Keyblades seemed to shed their rust under the healing light that tinted everything it touched with illustrious silver. Even the raging wind settled down and allowed the graveyard to return to its lifeless state.

Where the sun once hung in the sky like a beacon of fire, the heart-shaped moon that was Kingdom Hearts now glared down from above.

But how? The moon could only be summoned by the-

The Keyblade that now lay in the black-haired boy's grasp no longer resembled the two weapons that were bonded to his heart. The metallic blade had been transformed into a transparent, shimmering green as if it clung to the threads of reality with its fingertips. The two hilts had merged together to form a single grip, constructed of twin shafts intertwined together like vines. The filigree glimmered like emeralds as if composed of solidified moonlight, snaring any rays that fell upon its blade.

“The $\chi$-blade… but how?”

The $\chi$-blade chimed with laughter as if jeering at their naivete. The blade sang as it sliced through the air, the arm holding it aloft relaxing and dropping it to their side. The sand below the tip of the weapon turned to glass with the immense energy radiating from the razors edge of the verdant blade. The willpower coursing through the $\chi$-blade wielder’s eyes almost outshone the light of the weapon itself but was no longer tinted a malevolent amber. Now, their left eye radiated a piercing, chilling blue.

“We’re not happy about this, but we’re also not sorry,” Vanitas-Sora stated without emotion. “Kingdom Hearts is going to give Vanitas his own light. As for you three…”

Vanitas-Sora reared the $\chi$-blade back like a cobra ready to strike and plunged the ethereal weapon into the ground.

"You've held onto Sora's light for long enough. Now we're going to take it back."

The dehydrated land splintered as the $\chi$-blade dug itself deep into the earth, scattering dust and dirt as it vapourised everything in its path. Vanitas-Sora twisted the hilt of the godly weapon with an almighty CLICK that echoed within the minds of souls of those witnessing its majesty. The ground churned as if the blade had pierced the heart of the earth and released the lock binding it to the mortal plane. The scent of acrid burning filled the air as the raw, unfiltered power of the $\chi$-blade melted anything that dared brush against its tempered metal.

Neither Ventus, Roxas, or Xion had a chance to react before the Keyblades littering the landscape wrenched themselves from the soil. Invisible hands wrapped around the crumbling grips as they slid from the ground that was to be their graves. The battalion of Keyblades lay suspended in the air for a single heartbeat before jetting over to Vanitas-Sora at the speed of sound. The $\chi$-blade had not only wrested control of Kingdom Hearts, but it had also pulled the other Keyblades under its iron fist. They had been masterless for nearly as long as history itself, and it didn't take much to convince the weapons to dance to the beat of a new drummer.

“SHIT,” Roxas swore, realising they were about to face the wrath of countless blades that longed to decorate their metal with his blood. He shot forward as fast as his legs could carry him, hoping for just a fraction of Ventus’ speed to cross the bridge between their hearts. Vanitas-Sora was a sitting duck while attached to the entrenched $\chi$-blade, and the blond didn't want to behold the power they could wield once equipped with more Keyblades than stars in the sky. Roxas couldn't afford to fall victim to his emotions. Whether Sora was his Somebody or not… whether he was his friend or not,
Roxas would beat his brother into submission if it was necessary to bring him home.

With a bellowing roar that would've shaken a lion to its core, Roxas took aim at Vanitas-Sora's torso and prepared to cleave him in two.

The blond Nobody barely had a chance to blink before Vanitas-Sora whizzed past him, heterochromatic eyes locked onto his own with a terrifyingly vacant expression.

Oathkeeper and Oblivion folded in on thin air, clashing on the spot where their target once stood. Vanitas-Sora snatched a pair of Keyblades from the sky and swept them in a horizontal arc as if striving to slice Roxas in half. The tidal wave of Keyblades formed a single extended line of metal that carved across the landscape, striking the Nobody across his back despite the immense distance separating them. The precious air in Roxas' lungs was expelled in a single, blunt gasp as he was pelted across the sand in a flurry of fractured metal. The Keyblades may have found a new lease of life under the command of the fused brothers, but they remained eroded and brittle. It only took a single stroke to splinter the blades and render them useless.

Ventus' eyes widened as the pieces began to align before his eyes. Those Keyblades had been sitting forgotten in the cruel, merciless desert for centuries. The insurmountable army of keys meant nothing if they crumbled at the most delicate touch. All they had to do was whittle down the numbers, and Vanitas-Sora would eventually be weaponless.

Ventus whispered a prayer for forgiveness and leapt at Vanitas-Sora's rear while he was distracting by kicking Roxas' ass six ways to Sunday. The Wayward Wind came within a hair's breadth of their leather bodysuit before a wall of Keyblades pierced the ground between them, creating a barrier of metal that recoiled his attack before it could land. The Keyblades disintegrated into silver powder as the blow vibrated down their rust-laden spines and literally shook them apart. Vanitas-Sora seemed completely unaware of how close to death they had strayed as if the weapons had sacrificed themselves of their own accord. It was only the crunching of obliterated metal that alerted them to the danger they had unknowingly avoided by the skin of their teeth.

"Can you not?" Vanitas-Sora requested with a calm voice. "We're a little busy right now."

"No! I'm not going to let you do this!" Ventus yelled back, making up for their frosty disposition in spades. "If knocking some sense into you is what it takes, then so be it!"

"C'mon man, we're not trying to restart the Keyblade War here. Just let us have a little piece of Kingdom Hearts. It'll barely notice."

Ventus was flabbergasted at Vanitas-Sora's impenetrable indifference towards the situation. The conflicting characteristics of Sora and Vanitas had blended together to create a completely blank template, bereft of individuality and lacking personality. It was like talking to a Replica body that had somehow gained sentience, yet was still hollow on the inside. Vanitas-Sora was entirely deadened to the pleading of their brother, but it had afforded Roxas a chance to pull himself to his feet. Ventus could sense his twin's intentions from across the graveyard as he charged towards the black-haired Keyblade wielder with fury in his eyes. If the Keyblades were truly moving without any input from their master... masters?... then dividing their attention was the only means to crack their impassable defence.

Unfortunately, one half of Vanitas-Sora noticed how Ventus' blue eyes involuntarily flicked over his shoulder. He seized a Keyblade from the air, its silver star-shaped teeth glowing blue under the light of Kingdom Hearts and hilt a royal purple. The weapon found itself smashed against the intricate fleur-de-lis of Oathkeeper, absorbing the blow and splitting clean in half down its fragile spine.
“Oh, good call,” Vanitas-Sora remarked, tossing the remains of the periwinkle Keyblade to the ground. “I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Well, at least one of us is paying attention,” Vanitas-Sora huffed. A second Keyblade made of haphazardly bolted wood and topped with a lethal pickaxe placed itself in their free hand and attempted to swipe the Wayward Wind out of Ventus' grasp. “Keep your eye on the ball.”

“What one?”

“Whichever colour you prefer.”

“Oh my God, knock it off!” Roxas exclaimed, backflipping out of range before shards of Keyblade could pierce his skin. "This isn't a joke!"

“Hey, want to hear an actual joke?” Vanitas-Sora asked, his voice wholly devoid of any amusement that would typically follow that statement. “Why didn’t Xemnas go to the party? Because he had Nobody to go with.”

Vanitas-Sora promptly smacked themselves in the face before they could finish the punchline. Apparently, Sora and Vanitas weren't on the same page about everything.

Xion hadn't thrown herself headfirst into battle like the two blonds, but it wasn't down to a lack of bravery. Her self-preservation instincts hadn't withered that much. While Roxas and Ventus exchanged futile blows with their brother only for the kamikaze Keyblades to deflect every strike, she used the confusion to dart up to the stationary χ-blade. Tendrils of reflective glass extended out from the embedded blade like marble veins, as if the light of Kingdom Hearts had condensed into a physical form. Ploughing their way through Vanitas-Sora's personal armoury was all well and good, but they would be embroiled in combat until the sun snuffed itself out. They needed to strike at the source. Kingdom Hearts was nothing but a celestial asteroid without the key to unlock its secrets.

Wincing as the screeching of metal against metal resonated across the barren desert, Xion pushed her fears to the back of her mind and seized the hilt of the χ-blade with both hands. A thousand needles lacerated her arms as soon as her palms touched the conjoined grip as if her blood was filled with glass shards. Xion’s head was seconds from imploding as the chorus of a thousand voices screamed with the intensity of a supernova. The χ-blade was doing everything in its power to force her hands away from its illustrious hilt like she was soiling it with her presence alone. Xion refused to be dissuaded. Both Sora and Vanitas were counting on her, and she would rather die than let them down.

With a cry of passionate rage, Xion tore the χ-blade from the earth and hurled it at Vanitas-Sora. The neverending barrage of blows that the fused brothers were effortlessly brushing aside had done nothing to wear them down. Still, it had succeeded in the very thing that Ventus and Roxas had hoped for. It had commandeered the entirety of their attention. Vanitas-Sora hadn't even been looking in Xion’s direction when the glimmering green blade collided with their face. The mask of apathy slipped enough to reveal a sliver of surprise as they were hurled across the sand in a cascade of metal confetti from the decimated Keyblades. The black-haired Keyblade wielder tumbled head over heels in the dirt before eventually sliding to a standstill, surrounded by a sea of shrapnel.

They didn't get back up.

"Is... it over?" Xion gasped, struggling to catch her breath after launching a Keyblade as tall as she was across the wastelands. Roxas and Ventus were like stone statues, glued in place as they
apprehensively waited for a sign of movement from the downed body of their brothers. The few surviving Keyblades plummeted to the ground as the influence of the χ-blade snapped, tumbling like puppets with their strings cut.

The three Guardians of Light almost permitted themselves to believe that they had won, that Vanitas-Sora was finally incapacitated. They could take the two of them home. They could still figure this out.

Vanitas-Sora grunted and pulled themselves to their feet.

“…Ow.”

The mournful wailing of the χ-blade immediately silenced at the familiar touch of its master. Vanitas-Sora wiped their face with the back of their glove, smearing crimson blood across their cheek from the gash inflicted by their Keyblade. Their expression had returned to a stony, blank gaze with no evidence of the fissure in their façade. Their grip on the χ-blade tightened until the metal threatened to shatter, and swiped the weapon across the battlefield as if cleaving through the sky itself.

The emerald weapon hummed a melodic tune as a towering golden beam of radiance careened across the Keyblade Graveyard towards the Guardians of Light. The attack unleashed by the broken, malformed χ-blade in the Realm of Darkness was nothing compared to the might of the fully manifested weapon. The rampage of the beam left extensive scars in the earth as it threw up chunks of rock and dirt in its wake. The trio had no choice but to run for cover before their skin was seared from their bones and blood turned to steam. Roxas could smell the hairs on his arms singing as he narrowly avoided becoming a puff of smoke, but the shockwave that shredded the ground beneath his feet sent all three quaking to their knees.

"We don't understand," Vanitas-Sora admitted, panting as his arms shrieked from the force required just to lift the inhumanly heavy χ-blade. “Why are you standing in our way? Don’t you want us both to survive this?”

Roxas spat out the dirt in his mouth and struggled to his feet, ignoring the murky miasma clinging to the edges of his vision. He knew that it was futile to keep throwing himself at an enemy that could turn him into dust, but he refused to lie down and rest. The more his thoughts spiralled around Vanitas, the more he sympathised with the ex-Seeker of Darkness. The prologues of their stories were written by the same author. They had awoken into a world that had no place for them, one that declared they weren’t worthy of the gift of life. Their tales had only diverged when Axel and Xion came into his world and turned it upside down. What began as an inseparable trio was now an entire extended family who loved him like he once believed he would never deserve. Roxas couldn't but wonder if the person that Vanitas had become would've been his fate too, had he not found someone who cared about him when he didn’t care for himself.

"Because Kingdom Hearts won't give you what you want!" he bellowed across the ruins of the Keyblade Graveyard. "It doesn't care about you, or me, or anyone! All it cares about is adding more and more hearts to its mass! When I was part of Organization XIII, I wanted the same thing that you do: I wanted Kingdom Hearts to give me the heart I didn't know I already had. It won't ever turn out how you want it too!"

Xion’s head was still reeling from the overwhelming intensity of the χ-blade, but Roxas' defiance filled her with vigour. She pushed herself up and dusted off her skirt, eyes red with irritation from the dust but alight with unquenchable determination.

"I won't let this go either!" she insisted. "Vanitas said he doesn't have any light of his own, but that's
not true! His light comes from the people of Thebes and the residents of Halloween Town. It comes from the Hollow Bastion Restoration Committee and the scientists of Radiant Garden. It comes all the people who've seen a side of him that he was too afraid to admit existed. If Vanitas truly doesn't have any light to call his own, then we'll be that light!"

Ventus remembered the last time he taken arms up against his brother. It was in this very spot, trapped in the centre of an endless maze and lured by the exhilarating call of freedom. Vanitas had unleashed a barrage of Keyblades so dense that it seemed to block out the sun, and he had been powerless to fight back. It was only when Sora burst into the fray like a whirlwind of enthusiasm that he was able to overpower his brother and win against the embodiment of his personal demons. Ventus was considered it an overwhelming victory, but it couldn't have been further from the truth. He had accepted the darkness in his heart, but now he understood that Vanitas never accepted the light in his.

"Vanitas," he wheezed, joining his siblings in defiance against his brothers who walked a path of self-destruction. "I know you can still hear me in there. I want to say… I'm sorry. I should've never let you disappear all those months ago. I thought I was doing what was best for you by letting you remain in the darkness. I shouldn't have tried to make that decision for you. You don't need Kingdom Hearts to return your light. It never left."

_The only thing hotter than the withering glare of the desert sun was the fury coursing through Vanitas' veins._

_He had seen Sora's face a thousand times before, and not just when he was in the presence of his twin. Vanitas saw Sora's face in his reflection in the visor of his motorcycle helmet. He was there whenever he drew close enough to see his own image mirrored in the eyes of his victims before he gouged them out. He was there whenever anyone spoke Vanitas' name. He was inescapable, inevitable. There was no freedom from the shackles that his brother had locked around his limbs. Sora could've gone his entire life without knowing that Vanitas existed, yet he would stand in the brunette's shade until his half-heart decided there was no value in living and surrendered to the darkness._

_There was a moment where Vanitas dared to imagine what his life would've been like without Sora perpetually lurking over his shoulder. He could travel to the edge of the universe, where his brother's legacy was unknown and his name had no meaning. He could be free to slaughter those who opposed him and empower those who fought alongside him without judgement. Those dreams once littered the landscape of his heart, but now there were only pits of despair. The sporadic bursts of hope were now ignited only by thoughts of his body disintegrating into soot and his amber eyes slipping closed for the final time. Humans dedicated their lives to staving off the inevitable touch of death. They had no idea how lucky they were to experience death at all._

_It was a song with the sweetest melody, but it sang for an audience that would never hear its words._

"But, I didn't ask for this."

_Vanitas knew that he should be moved by the gravity of his situation, but all he could think about was how dumb Ventus looked when he was being serious. He almost envied him. Vanitas would've sold every ounce of darkness in his half-heart to afford a decade-long slumber like the one his brother had been granted. Hell, he would've settled for a single night of restful sleep. He had expected the blond to awaken from his coma as the same person who self-destructed to keep_
the χ-blade out of Xehanort's hands, but Ventus had grown into a mature young man while imprisoned in Sora's heart. It was almost sad. Vanitas wanted nothing more than to return to Ventus' soul and escape the fate that had been written for him long before Xehanort dragged him kicking and screaming into existence. He no longer recognised the face that looked at him with such sorrow. Such despicable pity.

"To be sifted apart, nice and neat," Ventus continued, commanding the attention of anyone lucky enough to hear his words. "We should be free to choose. Not just light. Not just darkness. We decide what we are."

Vanitas had always congratulated himself on his razor-sharp wit, but even he couldn't think of anything to say. After all… Ventus wasn't wrong. Vanitas wanted that too. It seemed that even after all these years, his brother remained as dense as ever. Ventus didn't realise how lucky he was. Choice wasn't a right – it was a gift. One that Vanitas had never been granted. Ventus got to decide which path he wanted to walk down, but Vanitas' road was already paved with blood.

“But… Ventus. I DID decide who I am. You see?”

Vanitas noticed how Ventus' upper lip curled upwards in disdain. He couldn't help but crack a small smirk. Even though the years had caused them to drift apart, Vanitas still found solace in the knowledge that he always knew how to push his brother's buttons.

"And what you are is darkness?!" Ventus exclaimed in frustration. It was just like his brother to stand in the face of destiny with his middle finger up. Vanitas would rather cut off his own legs than admit it, but he was proud to be Ventus' darkness.

There wasn't another being in the world who could hold a candle to his light.

Ventus said he wanted Vanitas to choose his own path to tread. Well, he was doing precisely that. The only path that would lead him out of the darkness and into the light was one where he ceased to exist.

“What I am is darkness.”

Sora had never been part of a fusion before, but Vanitas could still recall how it felt to wrest control of his brother's body and turn it against his friends. It was intoxicating, addictive. It was the closest he had ever come to merging the two halves of their shared heart, and he would've succeeded if it hadn't been for Ventus' infuriating will to live. It was like coming home to find the locks changed and the windows barred. It was like coming home to find that everyone had moved on and no longer remembered his name. It was like coming home to realise that the world continued to turn without him, and it would turn long after he was gone. It was simultaneously the sweetest honey and the sweetest poison.

Vanitas-Sora was an affront to everything Ventus-Vanitas stood for, right down to the twitching of their muscles and the synchronised beating of their hearts. Vanitas and Ventus clashed viciously for control of their shared body, but Vanitas and Sora never needed to. They were both looking for the same answer to the same question. The same beginning and the same end. Why would they scrutinise the other's actions when they were working towards the same goal? Why would they interrogate the other's thoughts when they were perfectly aligned. Every breath they inhaled, every blink of their eyes, every word they spoke. They once feared that their entwined hearts would never be separated, but their fusion had brought them closer to the point of no return than either of them
could've imagined.

All the hurt that burrowed into Vanitas' heart as he was left to rot in an oubliette of his own making. All the grief embedded into Sora's soul towards those he hadn't been strong enough to save. Their fusion had filled the rifts in their spirits and left no room for misery or suffering. They almost could've stayed like that forever.

Almost.

Vanitas-Sora could tell when their existence had run its course. Vanitas could curse to the moon and back that he was not having second thoughts about usurping the light within Kingdom Hearts. Sora could swear on his own life that his oath to abet his twin was for the benefit of them both. There was no hiding from the truth under the revealing glare of the light. If their determination was shared, then so were their doubts. If one shuddered at the consequences of their actions, then so did the other.

It would take a fool to try and lie to oneself, and Vanitas-Sora was no goddamn fool.

\[ \text{MASTER} \]

\[ I \]

\[ \text{WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND DEE HUMANS} \]

\[ \text{BUT I SHALL FOLLOW DEE} \]

\[ TÔ DÉ END OF DÉ EARTH \]
Vanitas-Sora sighed dejectedly and lowered their weapon. Ventus flinched, expecting the motion to be a ruse disguising a surprise attack that would finally strike them all down where they stood. No such assault came.

Ventus had spent many sleepless nights wondering if he was to blame for his brother's turbulent start in life. Had he somehow rejected his own shadow and doomed Vanitas to an eternity wandering the Realm of Darkness? Was there something else he could've done, some other ending that would've brought everyone home safely? As he looked across the remains of the Keyblade Graveyard at Vanitas-Sora's exhausted silhouette, framed from behind by the icy-blue light of Kingdom Hearts, Ventus contemplated if this was what fate had always had in store for them.

"Well, we supposed that's it then," Vanitas-Sora eventually admitted after a lengthy pause. "This is the end of the line. The road doesn't go any further than this. Somehow... we don't feel any regrets. It's funny... there are many things in our lives to repent for, yet this doesn't feel like one of them. We wonder... perhaps this was always the right thing to do. Maybe this is where our train was always supposed to get off."

Vanitas-Sora contemplated their own words as if hearing them for the first time. The insurmountable weight resting on their shoulders lifted and the fog clouding their judgement parted to allow the truth to shine through. Even the power of Kingdom Hearts seemed dim in comparison to the light of clarity that swept over the brothers. They looked down at the χ-blade in their right hand as if the verdant weapon could offer some advice that would sway the tide of war. The blade merely shimmered back under the glow of Kingdom Hearts, pulsating warmly in their palm in pace with their own heartbeats.

"Don't worry about us. We already know what waits for us beyond the horizon. There's nothing to fear from death. We were sure we'd never be lucky enough to feel the release that comes after the end. It seemed like a far-off dream, a wish that would never come true. Now that it's finally here... it's frightening."

Vanitas-Sora shook their head in disappointment, as if ashamed that such vulnerable words would ever be spoken. They tore their eyes away from the χ-blade and gave their attention to the three Guardians of Light that still stood like centurions facing down an unwinnable battle. They had heard so many times that they owed their entire existence to the heart that quickened within Vanitas-Sora's chest. That Roxas and Xion didn't deserve to exist because they were created without souls. That Ventus should've perished without the strength to keep himself alive. Vanitas-Sora never doubted that such statements were bald-faced lies, but it was only then that they realised the three were stronger than they could ever hope to be.

"We said before that we weren't sorry, but that was a lie," Vanitas-Sora admitted quietly. "We're
sorry that we ever let things get this far. In trying to dull the pain in our hearts, we only inflicted it on everyone around us. We may not ever reach the happy ending we dreamed of, but we can make sure that there will be an ending after all."

Their flat, expressionless grimace burst at the seams as if shattering a porcelain mask of indifference. For the first and final time, Vanitas-Sora broke out into a genuine smile.

“We hope that one day, we’ll do something to earn your forgiveness. Good luck.”

With that, Vanitas-Sora tightened their grip on the $\chi$-blade and swung it upon themselves. The ethereal blade sliced effortlessly through skin and bone, severing their neck and spilling droplets of sizzling blood across the sand. As the unfeeling light of Kingdom Hearts faded to give passage to the warmth of the midday sun, their body tumbled to the ground and scattered into ashes.

Even as their decapitated head smacked against the sand with a dull thump.

Even as their vision darkened and their breath slowed to a halt.

Even as their bones turned to dust and were lost to the wind.

Their smile never once left their face.

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