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**Seven Lives**

by **JCMorrigan**

**Summary**

The path from Luxu to Xigbar is not a straight line. He has been reborn into many bodies,
with many names, on many worlds.

Maybe he even made a few friends along the way.

A holiday gift for WhoaDoctorFreeman, and packed with things Freeman likes. Expect crossovers.
Sometimes it amazed him, that he could still remember, after millennia, after seeing more worlds than most people could conceive of, the place where he started, the names and the faces of those with whom he began.

It was always seven. Seven Lights. Seven Sins.

Ira: the sin of Wrath. Characterized by anger and hatred that harmed others.

The tallest boy of the six (for they were only seven when joined with their Master) was given to anger, and he expressed it at inappropriate times back in his teenhood, before everything changed. He was bumped into and called a rude name once at market, and had slammed the offender back into one of Daybreak Town’s many cream-colored walls.

This was not a good start for a prospective Keyblade Master, to say the least.

That was why Ira came up with the game, for himself and his friends to play. A way to vent his ire without harming anyone, truly.

Weapons made of wood and cardboard and foam. Faux armor, cobbled together from stray clothing. Statistics assigned to each. Rules set out about charge times for spells, where you had to act wounded if struck.

“This sounds like so much fun!” Ava cried as the six teens headed out to the fields beyond town for their first session.

“As much fun as mindless violence can be,” Invi huffed, though she, too, was happy about the new game.
“Hey, this isn’t mindless,” Gula reminded her. “Ira made me memorize way too many stats for that. And for the last time, YES, I want my sword to look this way! The only reason you say it has lower attack points is because you ASSIGNED it lower attack points!”

“You sacrificed practicality for embellishment,” Ira said stonily. “I assigned it a realistic value.”

“My blade will make short work of the rest of you,” Aced laughed, hoisting up his own prop.

“This is all just so…creative, Ira!” Ava gushed. “I almost feel like we shouldn’t even be us. Maybe we should invent characters to be! Pick out fun names!”

“Perhaps,” Ira mulled over. “It would be a good mental exercise to work out the details of our fictional universe.”

Ira fell into step next to Luxu, who was at the rear of the party. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“Huh?” Luxu turned to face him. “Oh. Yeah. Just don’t have much to say, that’s all.”

“Typical,” Ira sighed. Because it was. Luxu was definitely the most soft-spoken of the six, which was why he needed checking in on. If you didn’t make him tell you something was wrong, he would hold it in forever. “You do want to have fun with this, do you not?”

“Oh, I do!” Luxu agreed. “I’m really impressed by everything you came up with! You’re all going to be better at this game than I am, though.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Well, I do. Gula’s fast, and Aced is strong, and you know the most moves, and Ava is great at defense, and Invi’s smart at strategy. I’m just kinda…okay at fighting.”

“And that is why it is pretend.”

“Exactly! I don’t have to be good at it here! I just wanna have fun fighting with all of you. Actually, I kinda wanna make up characters for ourselves! I have some ideas for who I could be!”

Anyone but me, Luxu thought. It wasn’t accurate to say he hated himself, but he knew he wasn’t much. He had always dreamed of being different, somehow. More like the Master. More confident, more skilled, more sure of himself. More valuable.

The small party reached the field, and the toy weapons were drawn. They divided into sides first – Invi and Ira picking each other as allies first, then Ava and Gula each other, followed by Aced with Ira’s team and Ava pulling Luxu to her side. The free-for-all round, where all six would become rivals with no alliances, would be next.

When Ira gave the signal, they charged, beginning to call out the words that stood in place of their spells and swinging the soft weapon props. Screams of joy and laughter echoed all the way back to the town outskirts.

Avaritia: the sin of Greed. Materialism and want of things one did not need.

Ava pouted as she looked through the display window of the boutique. “I want it,” she said
“Then get it,” Gula encouraged.

“I feel like I should be saving my munny, though,” Ava continued to pout.

“You’re only going to talk about that bangle for the rest of the day if you don’t purchase it,” Invi sighed.

“Please, for the good of all of us,” Ira begged, “buy the bangle.”

“Ava,” Luxu broke in, “I think…you’ve been doing really great at practice lately. Even the Master has talked about how much you improved. You deserve a treat.”

“I do deserve a treat!” Ava decided, smacking her fist into the opposite palm. “I’ve been working hard! Okay! I’m going to get it!”

She disappeared into the shop, then came out with the sparkling pink-and-blue bangle around her wrist. “But it’s not fair if you don’t get anything, too,” she realized. “I know! Come with me! I’m gonna get something for each of you!”

“That would be spending too much of your money,” Ira sighed.

“Well, I don’t care!” Ava shot back. “You’re my friends, and I’m getting you presents! You can even pick out what you want!”

“I want something with lightning,” Gula said immediately.

“I won’t stand for this foolishness,” Aced huffed. “But if you’re going to INSIST, I can only ask for something with the motif of the bear.”

They strolled through market, and Ava eventually got orders from all of them – all but one.

“What about you, Luxu?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t really have a preference,” Luxu said shyly. “Just…whatever you think is best. I don’t even need anything, really.”

Ava gasped; “I know EXACTLY what you need! I’ll be right back!”

When she returned, she had in her hand a golden chain. She pressed it to Luxu’s palm, and Luxu examined it more closely. Dangling from the long chain was a pendant, a small golden charm in the shape of a trumpet.

“Because you’d been learning to play it!” Ava said with a smile. “And it makes me think of how much you love music in general!”

“Thank you, Ava,” Luxu said softly, flattered. “It’s beautiful.”

He chained it around his neck, settling it in under his shirt collar.

Acedia: the sin of Sloth. Inaction when action should be taken.

“I am not motivated,” Aced complained as the six prepared to move out for the day’s training. “I simply do not feel the drive.”
“We must continue our regimen,” Ira insisted.

“Must we, though?” Gula asked. “If Aced’s not feelin’ it, can’t he take a break?”

“We have all been up early mornings, day after day,” Aced reminded his friends. “When comes our next day of rest and relaxation? Perhaps it should be now. No, I demand it will be now!”

“So we’re just going to take a nap instead of training,” Invi snapped.

Ava gave a dramatic yawn; “I am feeling a little sleepy.”

“Come!” Aced demanded, turning to lead the way. “We will create a sanctuary of rest!”

Those who had protested gave in. After all, they’d had a very tiring week.

They rifled through every linen cabinet until they had turned up a sufficient amount of blankets – thick, thin, fluffy, diaphanous – and pillows, ornamental and casual. Then they staked out a lounge area in the tower, one with enough couches to hold all of them.

“Remember to lock the door,” Aced commanded once they had entered. “The Master cannot catch us in the act of lazing around.”

“Oh, yeah!” Luxu clicked the door closed.

Then they set to work decking the lounge, arranging little nests of pillows and blankets on the soft furniture to make it even softer and warmer. When each had created their own paradise, they tucked themselves in, lights turned low overhead.

“Goodnight!” Ava called out. “Oh, I mean…good mid-morning? Pleasant dreams!”

Luxu lay back, only then realizing how desperate he’d been for some extra rest, for a sphere of comfort and silence. Knowing his friends were nearby, he shut his eyes, snuggling into his blanket cocoon. Sleep came to overtake him soon enough, as it had the other five.

A locked door was no hindrance to the Master of Masters, who did in fact peer into the lounge to see his students slacking off. However, he concluded that they had been working quite hard. And with what lay in their future, it was best that they get their rest now, before they were no longer afforded the luxury.

Gula: the sin of Gluttony. Overconsumption, gulping down everything in reach. Most often associated with overeating, though it may be just as well said that eating the wrong thing could count.

The Master had prepared their dinner; they’d eaten together as seven, then departed to pursue their individual studies. As Luxu pored over his texts, Gula knocked on the door of his room.

“I’m still hungry,” the short, slender boy complained.

“Oh, okay,” Luxu replied, unsure quite what to do. “I think there are still some dumbapples in the kitchen – “

“I don’t want dumbapples. I want cake.”
Luxe did a double take. “You want what?”

“You heard me,” Gula insisted. “I have a sweet tooth today. I want cake. And a lot of it. Come help me make some.”

“But that’d be…really unhealthy,” Luxe argued. “Cakes are supposed to only be for special occasions, like birthdays – “

“Happy birthday, Luxe.”

“It’s not my – “

“It is now.”

Luxe did have to admit that he was enticed by Gula’s proposal, so he followed. The first step in their quest was to pick up the other four.

“It’s Luxe’s birthday,” Gula said by way of explanation.

“No, it’s not,” Aced argued.

“It is now,” Luxe said with a shrug.

In the kitchen, they retrieved the cookbooks. Invi paged through; “What flavor do we want?”

“Ooh, something with fruit!” Ava cried.

“Chocolate,” Gula said, deadpan.

“Something creamy,” Aced volunteered.

“If we’re going to make something we’ll regret later,” Ira sighed, “we may as well go all-out. Find the most indulgent.”

“I’m, uh…I’m okay with anything.” Luxe shrugged.

“But it’s YOUR birthday,” Gula urged.

“I like all of those things, though,” Luxe argued.

“I think it’s down to two recipes,” Invi decided. “I have a dark chocolate sponge cake layered with coconut-paopu mousse and topped with chocolate ganache. Or I have a four-layer chocolate-caramel-vanilla cake held together with caramel sauce.”

“Pick, birthday boy,” Gula urged.

“I guess…the coconut-paopu cake sounds really good,” Luxe decided.

“It does sound yummy!” Ava agreed.

Invi nodded. “Aced, grease two cake pans. Gula, get the lumps out of the sugar. Ava, I need you to find buttermilk, vegetable oil, vanilla, and espresso. Ira, I want you to find flour, cocoa powder, bicarbonate of soda, and salt. Luxe, I think the gelatin sheets are in the back pantry. I’ll prepare the paopos. I don’t trust you with cutting them.”
It was a messy process. Chocolate stains ended up on everyone’s clothing, and Ava tasted the raw batter enough times to get a scolding from Ira. Gula’s “gentle simmer” somehow became an explosive rolling boil, and he jetted across the room to prevent a paopu-juice explosion. Aced spilled coffee and would smell of it for the rest of the day. Luxu sat before the oven, impatiently awaiting the rising of the dough.

In the end, the final product looked a lot better than its creators did.

“I think more food ended up on us than in the cake,” Ava laughed.

Gula carried the creamy chocolate dessert to the midst of the kitchen, setting it on a counter. “Happy birthday, Luxu,” he said slyly.

“Happy birthday, Luxu!” Ava, Invi, Ira, and Aced chorused.

“Thanks,” Luxu replied, turning from the icebox where he was pouring himself a glass of milk to wash it down.

They divided the cake six ways. Even back then, the legends about sharing a paopu to unite one’s destiny with another had prevailed. This did not bother the six. They had shared many already in their meals. They wanted to be bonded, each one to the other five, and could not imagine what might drive them apart.

Invidia: the sin of Envy. Wanting what another has, resentfully. An insatiable desire for what one does not have.

The cast list had been posted, and the six exited the town’s theater in a buzz. “I can’t BELIEVE it, Luxu!” Ava cried. “You got the LEAD!”

“Yeah,” Gula joked. “Who would’ve thought ‘homicidal teenage sociopath’ would be your type of role?”

“I have to admit, that kinda freaks me out,” Luxu chuckled. “But it’s only pretend, like Ira’s roleplay. And I love his song from the end, when he’s trying to convince the girl to destroy everything with him.”

“And you get to sing that to me!” Ava chirped. “I’m so excited!”

“You probably won the role because of your singing voice,” Ira told Luxu. “You always were gifted.”

Luxu blushed furiously. “I…I dunno about that.”

“Stop,” Aced said suddenly. “Invi is not with us.”

“Huh?” Gula turned to look back over his shoulder. “I thought she left the theater with us…”

“Oh, no,” Ava moaned. “I know what’s happening.”

They all did.

Invi was found leaning against the wall of an alley around the corner, arms folded as she glowered at the ground. “Invi?” Luxu ventured as he approached her.

“I know you really wanted the role of that mean girl who dies in the first act,” Luxu tried to say comforting. “I really thought you were gonna get it, too.”

“Am I really no better than the chorus?” Invi growled.

“It was tough competition,” Luxu reminded her.

“Hey, for what it’s worth, my character just dies without doing anything,” Gula added. “Ira and Aced only show up for one song.”

“Aced didn’t WANT a big role,” Invi grunted. “He didn’t want to memorize lines.”

“No, I didn’t,” Aced admitted. “But I never said that. I was only cast as Gula’s father because of my lack of talent.”

“So I lack talent,” Invi growled.

“Nononononono!” Ava insisted. “Aced’s just playing himself down! We’re ALL really good at theater! You just got unlucky, that’s all!”

Invi gave Ava a very angry glare. Everyone knew that while Ava’s role wasn’t the one Invi had gunned for, Invi would have been perfectly happy with what Ava had, and Invi resented Ava for taking one of the spots that could have been hers.

“Are you going to sulk all day?” Ira asked.

“Isn’t she allowed to?” Luxu broke in. “It’s kind of a disheartening thing. If I’d actually expected to get a bigger role, and didn’t get it, I would be disappointed, too. We’re here if you want to talk about it, Invi.”

“You already know everything I want to say,” Invi huffed.

“It’s okay to be mad,” Luxu told her. “You can even drop out of the play if you – “

“NO!” Invi snapped suddenly. “The chorus is horrible, but at least it’s better than the five of you being in something without me!”

“Then I suggest you find a way to make the most of it,” Ira told her, “as those are your only two options.”

Invi sighed. “Fine. I’ll try to be less angry. After all, we are all in this show together, and we can rehearse in the clock tower.”

“I think maybe we should make another cake to celebrate that we all got cast!” Ava chirped.

Luxu smiled to himself, still feeling completely blindsided that he’d received such a high honor as the male lead – and the villain, at that. Playing the villain was such fun, after all.

Of course, it wasn’t the last time he would play the villain. But it was the last time he would ever play a leading role.

Luxuria: the sin of Lust. Most think of it as a carnal desire, a perverse quest for the flesh.
However, it has a more technical definition, that of simply longing for something one should not have.

Luxu treasured his friends above all else, at first. The days spent sparring in the fountain square. The nights spent stargazing on the grass. Though he did not want to pursue a romantic or physical bond with any of the five, he did, in a way, lust for them all. Without them supporting him, he was forgettable, a leaf blowing away in the wind.

When they came of age, however, that support was ripped out from beneath him in the worst way possible.

It began with the Master calling a conference of all of his students save Luxu. Luxu waited outside those double doors with bated breath, trying to figure out what he had done wrong to be excluded, other than simply be ordinary.

Then the five emerged, and he asked, “What happened?”
“It’s AMAZING!” Ava cried. “We’re going to be named the new UNION LEADERS!”

Despite his obvious exclusion, Luxu couldn’t help but break out into a massive smile.
“That’s AMAZING! I’m so happy for you guys! We need to do something to celebrate! Let’s go roleplay in the field! Or make the chocolate caramel cake! Or buy some new trinkets! Or…or…”

The others all glanced uncomfortably at him, then each other.
“…Or take a victory nap?” Luxu suggested sheepishly.

“To be seen in public with one another at casual events would not be prudent,” Ira stated. “It may be mistaken for a proposal of alliance.”

“Alliances are forbidden,” Aced continued. “Each Union must remain separate and strong. Its leaders cannot pay loyalty to one another.”

“But…” Luxu felt as though he’d been stabbed in the heart. “That’s stupid. They won’t let you be friends, just because you’re the Union leaders now?”

“We’ll always be friends!” Ava promised. “Just…not in the same way that we used to be.”

“To be Union leader is the highest honor after the Master of Masters himself,” Invi stated. “The responsibility takes precedence over even our bonds.”

“Especially if we are to be trusted with knowledge of the future,” Ira added.

“Knowledge…of the future?” Luxu asked.

“We’re going to get our own copies of the Book of Prophecies!” Ava squealed.

Luxu wanted to congratulate her, to congratulate them, but he was slowly deflating. “So…the five of you get to know everything that will ever happen…but I…”

“I’m sorry, Luxu,” Ava said sympathetically.

“You will have your role to play,” Ira said sternly. “The Master assured us of such. For now, we have our own matters to attend to. Let us do so posthaste.”
The five pushed past Luxu, beginning to split up into separate paths to their rooms – separate paths they would walk for the rest of their lives.

“Wait a minute!” Luxu called after them.

They stopped, turned.

“If you can’t hang out with each other…then…can you at least hang out with me? Any of you separately?”

“We cannot risk discussing matters of the future with one who is not privy to it,” Ira said simply.

That told Luxu all he needed to know.

He watched his world walk away.

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Superbia: the sin of Pride. The sin from which all other sins are born. Believing oneself to be superior without proper qualification; abuse of power.

They were gifted their robes and masks in a grand ceremony, before a packed auditorium. Luxu simply sat in one of those seats while his master adorned each of his childhood companions up onstage, placing the intricate metal masks over their eyes. Those masks were so detailed in their carving and obscured so much of the face, especially combined with the hoods of the robes, that it seemed Luxu was watching the Master transform each of his friends – former friends – into a completely different person.

Perhaps he was.

The Unions applauded their new leaders, then filtered out of the auditorium to divide themselves up. Luxu remained seated for a while, for the first time questioning all of it. What was to be achieved by doing things this way? Would they really be stronger apart than together?

“Hey, kid.”

Luxu gave a start. He stood to find the Master, hooded as usual, standing behind his seat.

“I know you gotta be feelin’ pretty crummy,” the Master said. “I mean, all your friends just got fancy new robes and titles and a book of infinite knowledge, except for you. I get it. It hurts.”

“They said you had a role for me to play,” Luxu replied. “What is it?”

“Spoilers,” the Master replied. “Can’t tell you that just yet. What I can do is give you your own spiffy costume. You get one too, you know. And this one’s actually the most important one of them all.”

He held out a folded square of black fabric and leather. Luxu took the cloak between his hands, unfolded it. It was an exact replica of the Master’s garb: simple and black.

“Does this mean I get to be your successor?” Luxu asked hopefully.

To that, the Master let out a long, loud laugh. Then, walking away, he simply said “No.”

Luxu was left alone to feel the cloak in his hands. It was a mimicry of the garb of the highest-ranking man in the world, yet it still seemed so plain, so unassuming compared to the
multilayered robes of the newly-crowned Foretellers. It was like a joke. A consolation prize.

Still, he slipped it on, knowing the Master would want him to wear it. He pulled the hood up over his head, feeling himself disappear from the vision of all. Not even a face, anymore. A black mass.

He had always thought of the Master as a father, a friend. He had trusted the Master. And he still wanted to trust the Master. The years they’d spent together couldn’t be erased. The times, when he was just a child entering the tower for the first time, that the Master had stayed up with him in his room, reading him fairy tales until he felt comfortable enough to fall asleep. When the Master had bandaged his first serious wound and made jokes about how applying random items to it would heal it faster. When the Master walked with him through the night streets of the city, pointing out how things only looked more dangerous in the dark, but weren’t necessarily so, so long as one knew how to find the outlines without the light.

He would trust. But that trust had limits. At some point, perhaps he simply had to acknowledge that he was the least of the lot, and the Master had never seen him as worthy of anything but anonymity.

That all changed when the Master called each to their one-on-one meetings with him.

“You wanted to see me?” Luxu asked, hardly believing the words himself as he entered the Master’s study.

“You sound surprised,” the Master called out. “What, did you think I forgot about you? Remember, there are no small roles. Only small apprentices.”

“Role?” Luxu repeated in disbelief.

“Did I stutter?” the Master replied. “R-O-L-E. Role. It’s time for you to get one. All the other apprentices are getting them. Would it really be fair to leave you out?”

If Luxu had been a more confident man, he would have said something to the effect of how the Master had seemed to think that was how things had worked ever since the Union leaders were crowned.

“No,” the Master went on. “I’ve been keeping you in the dark for a reason. See, I wanted you to have the most important role of all, but that involved you not getting caught up in things. Any day now, they’re gonna start hurling accusations, and this only works if you’re the one guy who knows the truth.”

“I…don’t understand,” Luxu admitted.

“Maybe this’ll clear things up.” The Master materialized his Keyblade, passing it over to Luxu.

“The gazing eye?” Luxu guessed.

“Ah…that’s not what it’s called,” the Master replied with a shake of his head.

“Oh,” Luxu said. “What, then?”

“Hm.” The Master almost seemed to have been caught off guard. “Actually, no name.”
“No Name…” Luxu repeated, thinking it was, in itself, a name.

“Well, gazing or not,” the Master explained, “that Keyblade does have an eye in it.”

The conversation that followed changed Luxu’s life forever. No, not only his life – the many lives he would have thereafter.

He learned, first of all, of the box, and what was inside of it – something he could hardly believe was real as opposed to a magic from his favorite fairy tales. Then of his role: what he was to do with the box. And finally he understood. He learned of the truth of No Name and its link to the Book of Prophecies – and, furthermore, the controversy the book would cause, and the war to come. (He wished he could stop it. He didn’t want his friends to fall in such a way. But after the Master explained the truth behind this plan, he could hardly argue.) He learned that he was supposed to leave, to get as far away as possible, and to seek out an apprentice. And with no Book of Prophecies to guide him.

Armed with all the knowledge he never wanted, he set forth from the tower, box in tow. If the others ever learned what was inside…if anyone in this city knew the truth bubbling beneath…

“Hey, hold up a minute!”

The Master was jogging out of the building after Luxu. Luxu regretted ever having doubted him, now. He blamed his own impatience, his own sense of worthlessness.

“I thought it over,” the Master said as he approached, “and no offense, but if I don’t at least point you in the right direction, you’re gonna get lost out there, and we both know it.”

“You know who my apprentice is?” Luxu asked.

“No,” the Master replied. “Don’t know that. Here’s what I do know. You’re gonna have to stack the deck a little. If this is gonna work, we need to play to the Darkness a little bit.”


“Dead serious. Certain places hold the balance between light and shadow. You’ll know them when you see them. You need to do your part to knock the dominoes over.”

“O…okay…”

“And when you see the opportunity to flood the worlds with more Darkness? Do it. Do it, and then make sure things still go according to plan, with no new variables.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. But most importantly, remember this. Right now, you feel the Light and the Darkness somewhere inside of you. I know this because I taught you to feel it. I’m great, aren’t I? But if you feel that replaced by, oh, I dunno, a force of LIFE instead…YOU’RE IN THE WRONG PLACE. Get it? Got it? Good.”

“I, uh…I think so,” Luxu replied.

“After that, it’s your choice,” the Master told him. “And I trust you, Luxu. May your heart be your guiding key.”

Luxu felt a sense of dread quiver through him, as though he wasn’t at all deserving of that
sort of trust.

   The Master patted him on the shoulder, just once. “Knock ‘em dead, kid.”

   With that, he retreated into the clock tower, and Luxu knew he would not be seeing his mentor again for an indeterminable amount of time.

   He returned once, against his better judgment. Ava found him. Sweet Ava, who had always been kind to him, looked out for him – for everyone.

   She accused him of being the traitor, the orchestrator. He could tell from the expression on her face that she wasn’t about to back down – that she could even be driven to violence, if necessary.

   So he told her the truth that the Master had told him.

   He wasn’t sure why he had expected that to fix anything. It had only made her angrier. And that, in turn, made Luxu angrier. He was serving his purpose. He knew why things had to happen the way they were happening. Couldn’t she accept that? Couldn’t she trust him?

   He posed that it would test the Master’s disciples. She screamed that the Master could never have wanted this.

   Then she rushed him, and he defended himself.

   A bell tolled.

   He managed to escape the scuffle, hurrying to get himself lost in the woods. He’d learned his lesson about trying to return to Daybreak Town.

   He only realized once he’d put so much distance between himself and Ava that he was missing a certain accessory, a pressure on his collarbone. As Ava had attacked, she’d managed to accidentally sever the golden chain around Luxu’s neck, dropping the tiny trumpet charm down his robe front and burying it into the earth.

   Fair enough. It wasn’t as though its symbolism held any meaning anymore. Not after this.

   He got as far away as he could. And he waited for the end.

   The cataclysm came. He watched his beautiful world become ripped to shreds.

   He was cast into the aether.

   And left completely behind as his world moved on.
Luciant der Freischutz

To be accurate, he started out as Luciant cen Freischutz. And he was in the wrong place.

How had he already fumbled the Master’s warning so badly? It wasn’t as though he had any control over where he was flung in the cataclysm – but still, he blamed himself. Anyone else could have landed in the correct worldline. Only the man formerly known as Luxu would manage to misstep right out of the gate. But he felt it. The absence of the Light and the Dark. Instead, the flowing of the aether, the Lifestream, what have you.

He took on the first of his new identities, once his original body had become worn out. It took him a while to get used to. He was a little taller, once he’d fully matured. He now also had pointed ears that collected far more sound than Luxu’s ears ever had. Bright orange hair, which he no longer kept encumbered by a black hood. Instead of the cloak, he wore the leathers of a tradesman. He learned very early on in this new incarnation that he was something called an “Elezen.”

Freischutzes were Garleans. Gunsmiths. Hence the “cen.” They manufactured and repaired the weapons for gunbreakers. These devices were alien to the one now called Luciant, nothing like the Keyblade of old. The Keyblade he still bore, but didn’t dare show. In an attempt to blend in, he learned how to operate a gunblade. It swung somewhat like a Keyblade, despite feeling incredibly different. It also shot projectiles without the need to activate a magic spell. It almost felt like too much power.

Luciant loved it.

He’d had to start from the bottom, meaning pretending he hadn’t already matured once. His parents “raised” him, and he played dumb, acting as though he needed to be taught these things. He rather hoped he could find an apprentice quickly, because he wasn’t sure how much more of this oddity he could take.

But in the incorrect worldline, he could find no apprentice. He knew that was what this was: a worldline. The world had split, becoming many, but they were the wrong worlds. Worlds that didn’t exist where Luciant was supposed to go. He found himself on a territory called “Hydaelyn,” which shouldn’t have been. Meanwhile, this place had nothing and no one of what he had been scheduled to interact with.

Had the Master foreseen this part? He could just imagine the man’s mocking voice: “Congratulations! You went and got yourself stranded in the wrong worldline.”

Yet he had no idea how to fix this particular problem. No concept of how to even begin traveling between worlds, let alone worldlines.

So for a time, he gave up.

He continued to work in the shop, piecing together the gloriously powerful blades. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad, living and dying a simple weaponsmith. He appreciated his parents enough. He hadn’t managed to make any friends – acting more mature than your age by accident and knowing your peers didn’t know half of what you knew wasn’t a social gateway, after all – but he did appreciate his neighbors, enough.

He had failed the Master. And he just needed to accept that.
“Freeshooter. Come to me. I know of your true nature, and I have a task for you.”

Luciant sat straight up in his bed, sweat pouring down his face.

Who had said that? It must have been a dream, but it had echoed so loudly, so real. It belonged to someone. Someone was calling out to him, telling him not to give up.

He hadn’t realized how desperately he had wanted a second chance until that very moment.

The summon was strong. Luciant did not know who had called him, or why. But he did know what direction the voice was coming from.

Ala Mhigo. Capital of the empire.

He was of age to travel alone now, and made the excuse that he wished to extend the family business. He loaded a cart with a stock of gunblades he had lovingly made, then gave his parents goodbyes that felt less bitter than sweet.

He made the trek across the empire to the gorgeous city of sandstone-colored walls and colorful tents, marveling in awe as he wheeled his wages through the thoroughfare. There were those who said Garlemald was corrupt, that it bent other territories to its will, but did those territories not need a government? A Master of Masters to bring them together? Rules to follow, to keep their union strong?

He found a room to rent for the night. He told the innkeeper that he was meaning to purchase a forge the next morning, to open his smithy with the stock he’d brought. He was allowed to bring the gunblades up to his room.

He waited for midnight to fall, then chose his favorite of the gunblades and set out for the palace.

Luciant had heard the voice in his dreams every night since the first summons. Always the same tone:

“Come to me, Keybearer.”

“You will travel the worlds again. But only through me.”

“Serve me and receive your desire. Resist me and face your end.”

He still had no idea what to even conceive the speaker as, but he could pinpoint the exact location of the source. Inside the royal grounds. Where a lowly gunsmith would not be simply allowed to walk in.

He felt rather unsure he could even pull this off. But it was his only choice. If he failed further, then nothing would ever come to pass the way it should.

In the cover of the night’s darkness, he stood outside the palace walls. There was a spell the Master had tried to teach all of his pupils, but none of them had quite mastered it. A spell for bending space to your will.

“You’re theater kids, right?” he’d said. “This is like making your own scene change. A new backdrop.”
Now, faced with heavy walls and armed security, Luciant knew it was do or die. The only way in was to teleport using the Master’s technique. He concentrated on it, thinking about where he needed to be versus where he was.

It felt like being ripped out of his body and then stuffed back into it, with a side of vertigo. But Luciant was on the other side of the wall, much to his own amazement.

“New backdrop,” he whispered.

Now to trace the voice. He wandered the halls, listening for guards – he wasn’t certain he could pull off the teleportation spell a second time, especially in haste. His heart guided him, telling him the way.

At last, he found the room. A field of magitek blazed, keeping him separated from his caller. And his heart nearly stopped dead.

It was a dragon. An enormous dragon, gray-scaled, all ridges and edges.

“You are late, Keybearer.” The voice sounded from inside Luciant’s mind, but he knew it was the dragon speaking.

“Sorry,” Luciant said meekly.

“I expected more,” the dragon replied. “Then again, you are my only hope. A destiny must be fulfilled; a contract carried out. For such a task, I require a Key. In this existence, there is only one Key, and it lies with you. I advise you to grow stronger, for your own good.”

“Why do you need me?” Luciant asked. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I was born of no belief,” the dragon explained. “Some believe me to be a reflection of Midgardsormr, yet my true origin is connected to the core of all.”

“To Kingdom Hearts?” Luciant asked.

“Yes and yet no,” the dragon told him. “A world that is a gateway to all. An ancient being that sleeps within. I am his shadow and a fragment of his heart. He and I are both called Shinryu.”

“You’re a Nobody,” Luciant realized.

“Yet again, you assume based on your shallow conceptions!” Shinryu snapped. “I was forged of memory and magic. Shinryu, in his beta world of gateways and fallen souls, remains whole, yet I am fragment.”

“Those two things don’t make sense together,” Luciant argued.

“You try my patience,” Shinryu told him. “I will forgo my mercy if you continue to do so.”

Luciant figured it was better to just stay silent at this point.

“The whole Shinryu has made a promise,” Shinryu explained. “He seeks a conflict, a battle. A trinity has approached him with the simple desire to return to their world of origin. You, too, wish to return to your world of origin. Both wishes can be granted, but for a price.”

Shinryu paused then, and after a tense silence, Luciant asked, “What is that price?”

“The whole needs warriors for his battle,” Shinryu stated. “You will mark them for the
Luciant didn’t think that really sounded like a smart idea. But again, he realized he had little choice. “Tell me how.”

Within a few minutes, the magitek barrier had come down. “Before you are sent to errands,” Shinryu stated, stretching out his wings, “you must prove your strength to me, Keybearer. I will not accept a weakling.”

“How am I supposed to – “

A bright beam of magic cut through the air. Luciant barely managed to evade it.

“Best me,” Shinryu growled in Luciant’s mind as he advanced, his golden underbelly glittering.

The air was filled with neon rays of magical energy. Luciant scurried around them, completely unprepared for this assault. It took him far too long to realize he needed to draw his weapon. From there, he attempted to approach Shinryu, to stall his attacks. This was not easy. Shinryu’s onslaught came fast and hard. Luciant found himself executing the teleportation spell without even thinking in order to save his own life – and at one point ending up walking on the ceiling without meaning to. He quickly put himself back down on the ground, trying to get so much as close to the dragon.

Yet it seemed to be futile. Shinryu attacked in a way that Luciant had never seen, with more ferocity than any Keybearer. Fatigued from dodging and casting spells that were ineffective, Luciant faltered. A beam grazed him, ripping open his sleeve and leaving an angry red burn on his arm.

So he was to die, then. At least he had tried. But he should have known, as should have the Master, that he was never good enough for this, right from the start.

Suddenly, from behind him, a purple wall of magic, pointed projectiles aiming at Shinryu. They erupted like a rain of enormous arrows shot from crossbows, pummeling the dragon into submission. At once, Shinryu fell, slumping to the floor.

Luciant’s first impression was the incredible wish that he could do something like that rain of purple ammunition.

His second impression was that he was not alone in the room.

“Thief, I understand.” The lilting, condescending voice was punctuated by the rhythmic footstep of boots. “Assassination would not have been permitted, yet would explain your presence here. Yet upon penetrating these walls, your first action was to unleash the most perilous of creatures in the royal menagerie and condemn yourself to death by its claw. I cannot help but wonder what led you to believing this was at all a sensible course of action. Are there not easier ways to do oneself in?”

Luciant turned to regard the speaker. He was struck with the picture of elegance and superiority. The man who strode toward him was tall, thin, and pale, with hair that would have been raven-dark save for a single streak of moon-white. He was clothed in an elaborate coat adorned with military medallions. His smirk, framed by prominent cheekbones, spoke of knowledge that amused him. His eyes were a pale yellow – a sign of a deep connection to the
Darkness – and regarding Luciant with the sense that the Elezen was most likely the stupidest thing this man had seen in his own lifetime.

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself,” Luciant defended hastily. “Shinryu – “

Should he tell the man the truth? That Shinryu had called out to him? What good would that do?

The stranger had reactivated the magitek that kept Shinryu caged. “Do take your time,” he encouraged. “I wish to hear only the finest of excuses you can craft.”


“No,” Luciant snapped at the dragon.

“No?” the man repeated. “So you forgo explaining your actions entirely?”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Luciant grumbled. Then, back to Shinryu; “He saved my life. I think I owe him an explanation at least.”

“Are you addressing the beast?” the man asked, now doubly amused. “Either you suffer delusions I can’t hope to cure, or you’ve got a story I desperately wish to hear.”

Luciant turned back to him. “I can hear Shinryu’s voice inside my head,” he said. Once again, it was a situation of little choice. He could die at Shinryu’s hand, he could give up, or he could invoke some help. Would he always need help? “He wants me to help him with…something. Because I have a special power. But he wanted me to prove my strength first, and that’s when you found me.”

“Proving your strength with flying colors,” the man mocked.

“I couldn’t do it,” Luciant sighed. “I’m too weak. Tell me how I can subdue Shinryu on my own.”

The man approached him now. “You’ve just spun quite the tale,” he stated. “You slither into the palace undetected, you loose Shinryu upon its occupants, and you attribute the claim to a voice only you can hear?”

“I…see how stupid that sounds now,” Luciant admitted.

The man was pacing around him, looking him up and down. “There is something…unusual about you,” he admitted. “Your speech does not sound Garlean.”

“Pay the Ascian no mind,” Shinryu seethed. “Your business is with me.”

“What’s an Ascian?” Luciant blurted.

The man flinched, but only slightly. “Where did you hear that word?”

“Shinryu called you one,” Luciant said sheepishly.

“And what else does Shinryu know about me?” the man asked.

“He is more than he seems,” Shinryu growled. “Do not trust him. He has a longer past than even you. In this worldline, the worlds have been distinct since before your cataclysm. He knows of things you cannot understand. He will use you for his gain and his gain alone.”
“He…he says you’re old,” Luciant sputtered.

The man turned to raise a brow at the dragon; “Truly? Is that the best insult you have for me?”

“No, not like that!” Luciant said hurriedly. “He said you’ve been alive longer than I have… and that…that means something. Because I’m…older than I look. He also says you’ll use me and betray me.”

“I hadn’t considered it,” the strange man admitted, “but to use and to betray are both actions I am well used to. I am beginning to believe there is more than nonsense to your little tale about hearing Shinryu’s voice, yet that brings me to wonder how, exactly, you developed such a connection to the beast.”

“Like I said, I’m older than I look,” Luciant explained. “I’m from…somewhere else. This is my second body. I have a – a weapon. It’s a special weapon, and I know how to use it to keep my life going past where it should. But I’m in the wrong place. The only lead I have on how to get to the right place is to do what Shinryu asks me to do.”

“Pray tell, what is it this Primal has asked of an apparent immortal?”

“He wants me to…travel worlds and ‘mark’ warriors for some kind of war,” Luciant explained. “Which I realize also sounds unbelievable, but – “

“You’ve not the scope of the breadth of my belief,” the man said. “Ah, but we haven’t been introduced. Not properly. My name is Solus zos Galvos.”

“Zos,” Luciant breathed. “You’re…an emperor?”

“That is not his name,” Shinryu broke in.

“Or not,” Luciant amended. “Shinryu says your name is – “

“He styles himself after the angel of truth,” Shinryu snarled. “And yet is anything but angel or truthful.”

“Angel of Truth?” Luciant guessed. “That’s your name?”

The man who wasn’t really Solus chuckled. “After a fashion, I suppose. The name you seek – “

He waved a hand before his face, and a bright red mask of energy descended upon it. Luciant had no idea of its significance, but it sent a chill down his spine.

“ – is Emet-Selch,” the man revealed.

“Emet-Selch,” Luciant repeated. “My name is Luciant cen Freischutz.”

“Is it, now?” Emet-Selch asked. “After all, it did take me two tries to reveal my true name. Can I trust you to be quicker to honesty with me?”

He wanted to say “Luxu.” But as he thought it over, he realized, “I could tell you my old name, but I really don’t even think that’s my true name anymore. I think after this long, Luciant is who and what I am.”

“Ah, fair indeed.” Emet-Selch nodded. “A sentiment I understand.”
“…You have a third name?” Luciant realized.

“Ah, ah,” Emet-Selch scolded. “We are here to discuss who we are rather than who we were. Yet let us arrive at the foregone conclusion. You, Luciant cen Freischutz, have been given a celestial task you cannot but hope to accomplish. You, lacking skill, nerve, or both, are turning to the first stranger to offer you a helping hand and a relatively kind word to pull your weight for you.”

“I don’t want you to pull my weight,” Luciant grumbled. “I just want – “

He couldn’t say he wanted a friend. Not to this man. This man obviously didn’t give a whit about friendship.

“ – to help us both get what we want.”

Wait, where had that come from? Luciant had put two and two together: this man was an opportunist. Why else have an emperor’s rank, and yet not be recognized as emperor? Why have two, even three names? Why be accused by a feral monster of using and abusing? Luciant wanted something, and Emet-Selch must also want something of importance. If he could string Emet-Selch along with a little bait…

But wasn’t that deceptive?

Then again, Luciant had learned a long time ago that the real world order was that of deception rather than honesty. A trumpet charm stomped into the ground.

“What know you of what I desire?” Emet-Selch asked.

“I can tell you’re an opportunist,” Luciant answered. “If you help me – and I don’t mean do my job for me – then I’ll help you get anything you want.”

“You’d best set your limitations. Promise me anything, and I will most certainly take advantage of it.”

“…Maybe I don’t have to.” Luciant turned to face Shinryu. “The whole Shinryu. He can send me to the right worldline.”

“WORLDLINE?” Emet-Selch repeated.

“Can he give anyone anything they want?” Luciant asked. “Can he give Emet-Selch his heart’s desire?”

“He can,” Shinryu growled. “If the Ascian delivers.”

Luciant turned back to Emet-Selch. “You have Shinryu’s word that if you pull through, you can have anything you want.”

“No,” Emet-Selch corrected, “I have YOUR word. After all, the Primal is conveniently quiet to my own ear.”

“Then trust me,” Luciant demanded.

“And for what reason should I do that?” Emet-Selch asked.

Luciant stalled. What would the Master do, if it were him? Take charge. Make a snippy retort. Laugh about it. But that was what the Master would do, and Luciant wasn’t the Master.
But…maybe it was time to fill in that void. If the Master couldn’t do what he did best, someone else would have to.

“Look at me.” Luciant found himself smirking. “I zapped myself into your castle, let out your big bad lizard, and told you stuff I definitely shouldn’t know. You should know by now you’re not dealing with just any old guy. Or do you wanna throw someone as crazy as me out the window and deal with the consequences?”

Emet-Selch’s smirk broadened. “Ah, there is what I wished to hear. You can pull your weight after all, cen Freischutz.”

“So help me already,” Luciant demanded.

“Very well,” Emet-Selch resolved. “I shall play along with you. Yet you know that at any moment I desire, you would be obliterated at my hand.”

“I know. All the more reason you should trust me, maybe. Would I be making this up after seeing you knock out the dragon?”

“Where was this spine when first we met?” Emet-Selch asked.

“In my other pants.” Now he really was drawing upon the Master too much. Maybe he needed to dial it back. “Anyway…if you put your magic together with mine, then we can collect Shinryu’s warriors and get our wishes granted.”

“The deal is struck,” Emet-Selch told Luciant. “Of course, you shall have to play ambassador to the Primal.”

Luciant turned back to Shinryu; “Will you take – “ No. Not a question. A demand. “You’re gonna take me and Emet-Selch to this beta world.”

“Lower the barrier,” Shinryu growled, none too happy about this situation.

“I’m not gonna fall for that again,” Luciant informed him.

“It is the only way I can allow you passage,” Shinryu replied. “You know the Ascian can protect you from me. Know this as well, however: should the Ascian turn on our cause, as Ascians inevitably do, then the whole Shinryu will be able to succeed where I have failed and reduce him to smoke and ash.”

“What nonsense is he spouting now?” Emet-Selch asked.

“He said to lower the barrier so he can transport us,” Luciant replied, “and that he likes your conviction.”

“I know a falsehood when I hear it, cen Freischutz. All the same, the flattery is endearing.”

The magitek barrier was down once more, allowing Shinryu to face his two visitors, strength somewhat renewed.

“Do not fail,” the dragon said.

And then there was Darkness.

All too soon and all too sudden, an ignited light, the outline of a much larger dragon with a
much bigger wingspan etched in fire upon a pitch-black void. The true Shinryu.

This is where the Master would tell him to turn down the lights. Say it, Luciant willed himself. Say it, say it, say it.

There was no witty retort. There was only fear.

“Ah, yes, that’s all well and good. You’ve shown off, all right. Now might we return to the matter at hand, of gaining a foothold in our respective plans in exchange for turning in your targets?”

Luciant had been so frightened of Shinryu that he’d completely forgotten Emet-Selch was there beside him. He was already glad he’d enlisted the Ascian’s help in this endeavor, dangerous as it was to trust him.

Shinryu’s voice was a louder, more booming version of that of the Shinryu in Ala Mhigo. “You will not delay me,” he demanded. “You will not betray me. You will bring back what I ask: no more, no less.”

“Ah, now I can hear your dulcet tones!” Emet-Selch called up to the dragon. “It’s rather a relief not having to go through my interpreter, as he seems to have been struck speechless by your very presence!”

“I’m fine,” Luciant muttered.

“Now, affirm you will give us that which we seek if we follow through,” Emet-Selch demanded.

“Whatever you ask of me shall be yours,” Shinryu stated. “The power to mark the warriors must come from the Keybearer alone, however. Only he may link their hearts to mine.”

“Keybearer, is it?” Emet-Selch repeated. “That sounds lofty.”

“How do I do it?” Luciant asked, his voice quivering.

“Show me the Keyblade of no name,” Shinryu commanded.

Luciant produced it, and the dragon let out a deep purr. “The sole Keyblade in this reality,” he explained. “It has arrived by error.”

“You mean to tell me you didn’t arrive in my home on death’s doorstep, having unleashed a force you could not contain, because it was all part of your grand plan, having gone perfectly to the letter in execution?” Emet-Selch mocked.

“Shut up,” Luciant muttered.

No Name glowed brightly. “Transform it,” Shinryu demanded.

Luciant gave it a swing, trying to remember from his Luxu days how form changes were supposed to be done. It came back to him ever so naturally. In his hand was no longer a Keyblade, but a wrought black crossbow, the Master’s eye set in its stock. A blazing purple bolt of energy materialized in place, ready to fire.

Emet-Selch’s eyes widened, but he said nothing further.

“This bow has the power to mark the chosen,” Shinryu explained. “Shoot once. Aim true.
The names of those I seek and their worlds of origin are now imprinted in both of your hearts. They are of both Light and Dark, Order and Chaos. Find them beyond these gateways.”

Portals, fifteen of them, opened up in a circle around Luciant and Emet-Selch.

“Failure means erasure,” Shinryu reminded them.

“I do believe we’ve gotten the point,” Emet-Selch sighed. “Come along, cen Freischutz.”

Emet-Selch turned to walk toward the nearest portal, putting up an arm to give Shinryu a dismissive wave of the hand as he crossed the threshold. Luciant quickly followed into a world he knew only as the Alpha.

As he found himself striding through the ruins of some sort of temple, he heard Emet-Selch, a few paces ahead of him, taunting, “Left our backbone behind again, have we?”

“I’d like to see you keep your cool in front of an enormous death dragon.”

“I do believe you just did.”

Luciant could’ve kicked himself. “Let’s just get this over with. The first target is a Warrior of Light.”

“Isn’t it always?” Emet-Selch sighed.

The Alpha, Palamecia, the Flooded World, and the Blue Planet were traversed without incident. On Planet R, the arrow had hit Bartz Klauser with little trouble, the sniper unseen. Where things got difficult was when it came to the Warrior of Chaos Shinryu had assigned.

Luciant perched in a tree on the other side of the big bridge, waiting for the armored man to step off the stone. Or armored tree, for the record. This was probably the strangest Warrior of Chaos he’d seen yet, and he could only imagine it going uphill from here.

There, the man in the bright pastel armor was clanking his way down, approaching Luciant’s range…closer…closer…the crossbow was positioned…

Luciant’s arms were suddenly seized and put behind him in a lock. “Hey, let me go!” he cried out of instinct. He struggled, but was held by someone much larger and stronger than he.

His captor leapt down out of the tree, parading him before the armored one known as Exdeath. “Hey, boss!” Gilgamesh proclaimed. ‘Look what I found tryin’ to bump you off before we got anything done!”

“What is the meaning of this?” Exdeath growled. “Speak!”


“Your words cannot sway me!” Exdeath said before Luciant could even get any out. “Nor can your weapons end me! You cannot prevent the Void from reclaiming this world!”

“Oh, will you just shut up?” Luciant groaned.

And with that, he teleported out of Gilgamesh’s grip, repositioning the crossbow from atop the bridge’s towers.
“I got it!” Gilgamesh cried, leaping for Luciant.

“Fool!” Exdeath batted him aside with an arm. “I shall be the one to put this assassin to eternal nothingness!”

Then Exdeath was behind Luciant without warning, forcing the Elezen to jump.

Teleport, he willed himself. Teleport, teleport, I need to teleport –

A gust of wind cycloned around him, slowing his fall until he landed cradled in the arms of his associate in what might be considered a compromising position.

“Tongues will wag if this sort of behavior continues,” Emet-Selch teased.

“You were the one who thought this would be funny,” Luciant grumbled.

“And I am, indeed, amused!” Emet-Selch let Luciant down, allowing him to stand. “As for our targets, we seem to be at a misunderstanding.”

“The only misunderstanding here is your misunderstanding of my power!” Exdeath bellowed before zapping himself to the ground before Emet-Selch, throwing a disc of magical energy at him.

The Ascian batted it aside with one hand. “Pitiful. And you’re the one who intends to bring about this world’s destruction?”

The juxtaposition of the pair got Luciant thinking. Maybe he could talk Exdeath down. “On that subject – “

He then had to duck a swinging sword from Gilgamesh. “This is the FUN part of the job!” the weapons-meister laughed.

“Okay, that’s it!” Luciant growled. “No more Mr. Nice Elezen!” He let No Name revert to its true form.

And Gilgamesh flat-out dropped his weapon.

“Boss!” he cried. “BOSS!”

“DO NOT TROUBLE ME WITH YOUR WHIMSY!” Exdeath yelled, building up a deadly-looking sphere of magic between his hands.

“Oh, this ought to be very entertaining,” Emet-Selch replied, putting up a hand to let a bright purple flame generate in his palm. “We did not promise mint condition for our delivery, after all. It is enough that you are merely alive…if barely so.”

“YOUR FLOWERY WORDS DO NOT THREATEN THE HERALD OF THE VOID!”

“Your belligerent bellowing, on the other hand, has succeeded in annoying me.”

“HEY! CUT IT OUT!” Gilgamesh ran between the two of them, waving his hands excitedly. “HE’S GOT A KEYBLADE!”

“A WHAT?” Exdeath’s magic attack exploded in his hands and went wild, sparks ricocheting off the bridge. Emet-Selch protected himself with an invisible barrier while Luciant hit the dirt.
“A real Keyblade!” Gilgamesh insisted, pointing to Luciant. “LOOK!”

Exdeath looked, then did an immense double take. “YOU HAVE A KEYBLADE!”

“Yeah, isn’t that what Polka-Dotted Pants here just said?” Luciant growled as he struggled to his feet. He then fired an accusatory glance toward Emet-Selch; “Thanks for shielding me, by the way. Real good show of teamwork.”

“You may choose to interpret it as trust in your abilities, should you choose,” Emet-Selch told him. “Or you may simply recall that I made no promise to return you in one piece, either.”

Exdeath was suddenly upon Luciant, pulling him up by the collar. “YOU HAVE THE KEY TO BRING ABOUT EVERLASTING DARKNESS AND THE VOID!” he cried excitedly.

“And who says I’m gonna use it for that?” Luciant choked out. “After all, you did just try to kill me and my pal here.”

“We are associates,” Emet-Selch sighed. “Not compatriots.”

“So who says I wanna use this Key for anything close to what you want?” Luciant continued.

“Where’d you even GET that thing?” Gilgamesh asked in awe. “I thought they were all gone!”

“Trade secret,” Luciant answered. “Here’s the deal. I wasn’t trying to kill you with it. I was just trying to mark you for later. See, I’m an emissary of a grand cosmic design, like it or not. Something big’s going down between the worlds.”

“In the Rift?” Exdeath dropped Luciant, who fell hard onto his backside.

“You’re not the graceful type, are you?” Luciant grunted as he stood. “Rift, Beta, whatever you wanna call it. There’s gonna be a great big showdown. The best of the best and the worst of the worst. Here’s the thing: if the worst of the worst win, well, that means they get ultimate chaotic power. AND the goody-two-shoes are gone. I think you can put two and two together.”

“The Void,” Exdeath said reverently.

Really, Luciant was just making it up as he went along. He had no idea if victory in Shinryu’s arena meant the return of the void or not. But he had Exdeath on the line; he just needed to reel in the bait. “You can’t turn your back on the Void, now, can you?”

“Give me the method of transport,” Exdeath demanded.

“I’m gonna hit you somewhere non-fatal as a show of good faith.” Luciant transformed No Name once again into a crossbow. “Also, the catch is, you show up when you’re done with your business here.” At least that had seemed to be the pattern so far; none of the teleportations were instantaneous. “You finish your story, and the big guy starts up your next chapter.”

“Whom do you serve?”

“Void incarnate.”

“Give it to me,” Exdeath commanded once more. “I will not ask again!”

And Luciant shot him in the foot.
The arrow didn’t hurt at all. It simply absorbed into Exdeath, as it had all of the other targets. “Now I need only wait,” Exdeath told him. “My domination here shall open the door to a new realm of conquest!”

“Hang on.” Luciant turned to Gilgamesh. “You’re on the list, too.”

“I’d rather just have your Keyblade,” Gilgamesh told him.

“Tough luck,” Luciant grunted as he pulled the trigger on Gilgamesh, marking him as well. “That’s what you get for wearing polka-dotted pants.”

“This shall be remembered!” Exdeath declared.

“Cool,” Luciant replied. “Now, my ASSOCIATE and I have lots to do and not much time to do it, so if you’ll excuse us without bothering us again.”

He turned on a heel and stalked away. Emet-Selch watched him in mild awe before following, giving his customary wave to Exdeath.

“If they’ve tricked me,” Exdeath muttered, “I’ll track them down to the ends of the Rift!”

“He didn’t even tell me where he got it,” Gilgamesh pouted.

Across the meadow, Luciant heard a familiar voice address him: “Now, where is that particular cen Freischutz when he’s needed?”

“What are you talking about?” Luciant asked meekly.

Emet-Selch shook his head. “Gone yet again. For a moment, I thought I observed behavior worthy of an Ascian. Something greater than what you are shone through for the shortest of glimpsers. Something quite Dark, if I may.”

“I just said that to get him to stop attacking us,” Luciant grumbled.

“Is that so?” Emet-Selch challenged. “You willingly associate with an Ascian, and then you speak the language of the tree of evil? There’s a villainy about you, cen Freischutz. Though…can I call you that, as of this moment? No ‘cen’ could act the part of the mercenary so well. No, a new title is required. Perhaps something not yet coined in Garlemald. A title to represent the cosmic herald of chaos.”

“You can’t just make up a new title and act like it’s common,” Luciant argued. “Things don’t become valid just because you said them.”

“Clearly, you haven’t spent enough time with me yet, if you believe that to be the case.”

The more they traveled together, the more Emet-Selch revealed about himself to Luciant, but never the whole picture. Luciant now knew what an Ascian was. Who he’d associated with. A vague idea of how long he’d really been alive, replacing his body time and time again. But he was still missing pieces. The exact nature of Emet-Selch’s history with Garlemald was one. And now he began to wonder just how long he’d been toying with the empire…shaping it.

“I’m not like you,” Luciant groaned.

“Perhaps we are approaching this from the incorrect angle,” Emet-Selch posed. “Do you truly not wish to be similar to me?”
“Wha – what are you talking about?”

“Something inside of you wishes to break free,” Emet-Selch observed. “Your meek demeanor hides a sharp tongue. Your finger is quick to the trigger. You claim you are following some sort of destiny rather than a moral code. If the future is set in stone, what holds you back from entertaining yourself along the way to the predestined outcome? Can you truly do anything evil if the outcome remains static? If not, then why restrain yourself?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Luciant argued, though he wasn’t exactly sure how anymore.

“Do you admire me?”

Luciant froze. “We don’t have that kind of partnership.”

A sigh. “No, no. Do pry your mind out of such matters. What I ask is if you wish to emulate me. Or your new friends from the bridge, flora and fauna.”

“I want to be like my Master,” Luciant grunted.

“Was your Master considered good or evil?”

“He was considered good.”

“And aside from what he was CONSIDERED, what was he?”

That gave Luciant more pause than it should have. “Complicated,” he answered.

“Always complicated.” Emet-Selch shook his head. “You do so love to tangle matters into something more than what they are at heart. Very well. I shall play the part. After all, you haven’t managed to bore me thus far, which is the minimum requirement. At the very least, consider fostering that sharp tongue a little more. Even if you aren’t of the Darkness, or the Chaos, or whatever you choose to call the wrong side, you’ll get much further on that than on the pathetic act you’ve been putting on to garner pity.”

“I don’t do it for pity!” Luciant snapped.

“Then why act as though you haven’t got that facet?”

“Because…”

Because being humble was a virtue. Because when you said you didn’t care what flavor of cake you wanted, it meant others could have the flavor they wanted…but also think of how wonderful it was that Luxu had considered them. When you didn’t voice a preference as to your gift, you put it in the giver’s hands, and how wonderful for them to be in control! When you offered a shoulder to the one who had missed her opportunity, maybe she would stop sulking and act like a good friend for once, happy that you’d gotten a leading role.

Maybe he was Darker than he’d thought.

“Because I haven’t practiced it,” he grunted.

“Ahhhh, now we are getting somewhere,” Emet-Selch declared. “There may be something of worth within you yet. For the time being, shall we proceed toward the World of Balance?”
The World of Balance was where everything went wrong, only worse than it had on Planet R.

Luciant had marked the Chaos target in the kingdom of Doma, and now strode away from the monarchy’s walls with Emet-Selch at his side. “Next up is Terra Branford,” he mused.

“Yes, I’m aware,” Emet-Selch responded. “My heart bears the same inscriptions as does yours.”

“Just so long as we get away from that Kefka guy,” Luciant sighed. “Did he seem unhinged to you, or – “

Emet-Selch casually and wordlessly grabbed Luciant’s arm and pulled him sharply to the left, continuing to walk all the while, not turning his back. Luciant was dragged out of the way of the site where a massive, pike-sharp icicle pierced through the air; it would have killed him if not for Emet-Selch.

“Oh, drat!” a half-falsetto voice proclaimed from behind. “And here I had thought I would get my tit-for-tat!”

“I don’t believe there is any question as to if he is ‘unhinged,’” Emet-Selch sighed. “The case seems to be in the point.”

Luciant whirled on a heel. Kefka was floating a few inches off the ground, graceful as a ballerina, decked out in a green-and-gold haute couture train wreck of polka dots, asymmetry, and puffy sleeves. All in all, he made Gilgamesh look like a supermodel.

“What was that for?” Luciant snapped at him.

“Oh, don’t play dumb,” Kefka retorted, folding his arms. “You shot me!”

“You noticed?” Luciant was taken aback. “Why wait until – “

“To have the element of surprise, idiot!”

“It wasn’t even an offensive attack!” Luciant argued. “All I did was cast a spell on you! It won’t even take effect until after you’ve done what you need to do to this world!”

“Yes, well, all the same, I was looking for an excuse,” Kefka replied.

“An…excuse?”

“I’ve already bumped off everyone in Doma,” Kefka sighed. “Now there’s nothing more to DO. Destroying you will entertain me for at least five more minutes.”

“Wait, WHAT – “

Now Emet-Selch shoved Luciant over so that he faceplanted in the dirt as a massive tidal wave of flames rolled over where he’d been standing.

“I don’t recall being employed as your governess,” Emet-Selch muttered.

“Oo-hoo-hoo!” Kefka cried, looking Emet-Selch up and down. “Now, YOU’RE a piece of work!”

“Spare me,” Emet-Selch groaned. “And, while you’re at it, do spare my associate. I rather
need him in order to acquire my heart’s true desire.”

“Since you asked so nicely…” Kefka pretended to think it over. “No. I’ll just go after BOTH OF YOU instead!”

Sharpened ice projectiles descended over the field; Emet-Selch broke them into a snowfall with his own magic while Luciant teleported away. As Luciant appeared higher in the air, upside-down like a bat, Kefka rocketed toward him, only to be met with the shaft of No Name.

“You know they’re getting desperate when they use their house keys as their weapons,” Kefka sighed.

The series of events to follow were a blur to Luciant as he teleported frantically across the field, evading Kefka’s attacks. Ice needles planted into the grass; a forest fire was started some miles away due to a missed projectile. Emet-Selch did his part to counter the sorcery, redirecting a lightning strike back at Kefka himself only for the Magitek Knight (who seemed more dressed as a jester) to flit out of range and let an outer wall of Doma be impacted.

Luciant wasn’t certain exactly when he had stopped feeling fear for his life and begun to feel an adrenaline thrill. Perhaps the two were the same sensation, just with a different label. It had become a chase; whenever Kefka would spirit himself across the field, Luciant would beat him to the target location, upside-down again and launching his own magic attacks from No Name. He kept Kefka’s eyes following him so that Emet-Selch had a chance to launch his more powerful attacks; with every move, Kefka’s misses became nearer and nearer, his voluminous sleeves now torn and tattered and some of his ornamental sashes severed on the ground.

At last, Luciant was pinned down in a massive bodysuit of ice, covering No Name as well, leaving only his head free. Kefka descended onto the chest-plate, pointing both index fingers to Luciant’s face. “It’s OVER!” he cried.

Then, pointing to the side; “AND DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!”

Emet-Selch found himself spun around by an icy wind that lifted him from the ground, depositing him further away from Luciant, his back turned.

Kefka stomped once on Luciant’s shell, looking him down in the eye. “Any last words?” he asked.

Luciant choked on the sentiment. But as the seconds ticked and Kefka hadn’t finished him off, actually waiting for a final statement, he came up with it: “I think I see why you’re compelled to kill everyone you meet. No one would want to be friends with you anyway.”

Kefka pondered this, then threw his head back into a laugh.

By then, Emet-Selch had recovered, throwing a neon-bright beam at Kefka. The Knight simply bent over backward to let it pass over him. “Look around, will you?” Kefka encouraged. “What do you see?”

The field had been frosted over, killing the plant life in an early winter. In the distance, a raging fire blazed. The closest district of Doma was crumbling to rubble.

“This is your fault as much as it is mine, you know,” Kefka pointed out. “Does that make you feel guilt?”

“Why should it?” Luciant spat, surprised at his own words. Well, why would he feel guilty
over a world he didn’t belong to? He’d sat through the destruction of his own world willingly.

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Emet-Selch admitted. “While the method is cruder than I prefer, it is fittingly chaotic.”

Kefka stomped on the ice shell again, this time shattering it and letting Luciant go. He took two great paces back, skipping in his steps. “You know, I think I’ve changed my mind,” he stated. “You two put up a real good fight, and I think you’re actually both a lot like me!”

“Nothing so BASE,” Emet-Selch sighed.

“Nothing so…horrible,” Luciant added.

“Keep telling yourselves that,” Kefka chuckled. “Whatever lets you sleep at night. But that was the most fun I’ve had in a while. And anyone who manages to shoot me and get away with it does admittedly deserve my respect. Tell me, what sort of spell was it, anyhow?”

Luciant struggled to his feet. “An investment,” he stated. “Destroy what you’re looking for now. Then, when the spell kicks in, destroy worlds’ worth later.”

“Well, why didn’t you just SAY that in the first place?” Kefka cried.

“Would you have believed it?” Emet-Selch asked. “Or would you have thought it a crude excuse by a pair of would-be assassins?”

Kefka shrugged. “Either way, I’m amused. I’m actually looking forward to whatever you two have planned for later. Maybe we can go on a spree! You, you, and me, destroying worlds together! It’ll be fun!”

“It wouldn’t be the first world I destroyed,” Luciant muttered.

“Now, what was that?” Emet-Selch asked, though Luciant was pretty sure he’d heard clearly.

“Later,” Luciant sighed.

“I may take you up on your offer, you know,” Emet-Selch told Kefka. “On a couple of caveats. One being that I do not simply target a core and wait for an eruption. I see no satisfaction without the proper buildup of pandemonium. Conquer and subjugate first. Torment and taunt. THEN destroy.”

“You’re a man after my own heart!” Kefka placed his hands over his chest.

“The second caveat,” Emet-Selch groaned, “is that you stop tossing come-ons my way as though I will ever be a potential paramour to you.”

“Don’t swing that way, huh?”

“If ‘that way’ is buffoons without finesse,” Emet-Selch retorted, “then no, I do not swing ‘that way.’”

Luciant hid a giggle into his sleeve, disguising it as a cough.

“I’m certain you have much more of this world to ruin,” Emet-Selch concluded. “Our spell planted, we shan’t detain you further.”
Luciant almost felt a sense of dismay. He hadn’t realized it, but he rather wanted to get to know the Knight better. If anything, Kefka had a sense of fun. Luciant needed some fun in his life. Yet he knew he couldn’t dally here. “Now that our hearts have crossed paths,” he suggested, “they might again.”

“Oh, don’t go and get all SENTIMENTAL on me!” Kefka spat. “I hate sentiment! Hate, hate, HATE IT!”

“Then you’ll get along just fine with the other warriors we marked,” Luciant said before turning to depart.

After giving his customary wave to Kefka (who was springing back into Doma to see what else he could wreck before moving on to Valigarmanda), Emet-Selch matched Luciant’s pace. “You’re finally beginning to impress me,” he admitted. “Insofar as a mortal can…but you aren’t truly mortal, are you?”

“We both know I don’t know you well enough yet to tell you my story,” Luciant grunted. “But that was the most times I’ve ever gotten the teleportation spell to work in a row. I am getting better.”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t talking about that at all,” Emet-Selch replied. “I referred instead to your retorts. Your diplomacy. You truly do know how to win the heart of the twisted and Dark. Is that not what you are, at your very own core?”

“How many times do I have to keep telling you I’m complicated?” Luciant snapped.

“Until you stop believing that lie. As it were, I would be loath to see you deny that you had a way with our…lunatic.”

“He seemed more interested in you,” Luciant muttered.

“It seems most are,” Emet-Selch replied. “That I draw attention is an objectivity. But you! You are the one who broke through the madman’s façade! You, tapping into his secret insecurity!”

“I did what?”
“Reminded him that he had no kindred spirits. Which, in turn, made him realize he was about to rid himself of the only ones he’d ever met.”

“He was impressed with YOUR magic’s destruction,” Luciant argued.

“I said you were improving,” Emet-Selch responded. “Not that you were in any way capable of running this operation without my assistance.”

“What about you?”

“What ABOUT me?”

“You didn’t have to protect me,” Luciant stated. “I could’ve survived a lot of those attacks. But you looked out for me. You stopped me from getting hit. Why?”

“It goes no deeper than your Key,” Emet-Selch told him. “Without that Key, this operation is moot, and I benefit from nothing.”

“Really? Because…I think maybe you’re getting attached to me.”
“Don’t be absurd.”

“We’ve been traveling across a lot of worlds together. I think we’re friends.”

“And I think we are most certainly not. As friendship requires mutual feeling, that, in turn, means any bond you perceive between us is null and void.”

“What if I like being friends with you?” Luciant asked. “What if I like how snarky you are, and how you got me to realize how much I don’t care about fitting into a moral mold?”

“Then you are chasing the wind.”

“And what if I decide you’re my friend, whether or not I’m yours?”

“That isn’t at all how it works,” Emet-Selch sighed.

“I think by the end of this,” Luciant told him, “you’ll like me.”

“I think by the end of this, I shall still view you as a tool. No more, no less. Now let us cease this line of conversation and focus on our missing Esper.”

“All right. If you say so.” Luciant shrugged.

But at this point, he really wasn’t sure why Emet-Selch was denying that they liked each other’s company.

Midgar, on Gaia, was a strange city. Luciant had never seen anything quite like it. He was used to stone walls and torches of flame. This was metal and electric. Cold and unfeeling, though that had less to do with its construction and more to do with the sense he got of its authority.

“Barbaric,” Emet-Selch muttered as he pried his boot off a wad of gum that had been discarded on the sidewalk outside Shinra Tower.

“I think I would like it,” Luciant admitted, “if it felt less cruel.”

“Whereas I think it could stand to be moreso,” Emet-Selch countered. “It is but a shadow of Amaurot.”

“Amaurot?”

“Oh, have I not yet told you this part of the tale? My own city, from before. Much like this in construction, what with its bright lights and towering skyscrapers – ”

“You’ve seen something like THIS before?” Luciant said in awe.

“You’ve traveled to how many worlds now,” Emet-Selch countered with a shake of his head, “and still you manage to be surprised by anything at all?”

“…Shut up.”

“Amaurot was a jewel. This is merely cut glass, by comparison. Filthy and unrefined.” His lips played at smirking; “I don’t suppose you wish to tell me about your own point of origin?”

“We’re getting close to the targets,” Luciant said suddenly.
“Oh, not even a hint?”

“…It was called Daybreak Town,” Luciant admitted.

He was not prepared for the flummoxed expression on Emet-Selch’s face.

“You’ve heard of it?” Luciant asked in surprise.

“The Age of Fairy Tales,” Emet-Selch said softly. “That would make you…wouldn’t it…?”

“Make me what?”

“It seems I won’t have a chance to elaborate. The target appears to be speeding out of range as we speak.”

“Don’t change the subj – wait, WHAT?”

Luciant whipped around. The spiky blond head they’d been pursuing was jetting off on a sleek black motorcycle. Beside it, a dingy truck painted some awful shade between mint and aqua.

Luciant’s brow furrowed. “I’ve got this.”

He blinked from where he stood to a nearby wall of chrome, caught halfway up to the speeding vehicles. At the same time, enemy forces had given chase; the motorcyclist was using a rather unwieldy-looking sword to fend them off. Luciant blinked again, jumping across the street and several feet further up, closing the distance. He teleported from wall to wall, keeping the cycle in his sights as he readied the first shot.

Click. Cloud Strife was marked without even noticing, diverted by his other foes.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Luciant kept jumping, hoping no one would notice a teleporting Elezen above the chaos. This next shot would be a little more difficult. He aimed through the glass window of the truck, only a faint outline visible through the window’s tint –

And now Tifa Lockhart was also marked.

He jumped back, landing on the street in front of Emet-Selch. “How did you like THAT?” he asked boastfully.

“I suppose it was passable.” Emet-Selch smirked as he began to pick up the pace.

“Passable?” Luciant repeated. “PASSABLE? That was the real deal, old man!”

Emet-Selch snickered. At least they were off the subject of Daybreak Town. If he’d put two and two together, then he really shouldn’t have been traveling with Luciant at all.

“Shall we proceed to locating Sephiroth?” the Ascian suggested.

“I’m thinking about that,” Luciant told him. “The last two times, the Warriors of Chaos weren’t so easy to snipe. They WERE easy to talk to about the benefits of world destruction by a couple of other rogues.”

“Luciant der Freischutz, calling himself by the title of rogue? My heart may very well stop.”

“That’s what they see me as, anyway,” Luciant amended. “They don’t know that it’s – “
“Complicated, complicated, always complicated!”

“I say we don’t snipe Sephiroth,” Luciant decided. “This time, we talk to him. We invite him.”

“At last, the Keybearer takes charge. I’d been waiting so impatiently, you know.”

“I have too,” Luciant admitted under his breath.

They found him nowhere less significant than the planet’s core itself. Upon looking into the green of the Lifesteam, Luciant felt a chill. This and the Void were what had replaced Light and Darkness. It was the signature that let him know he was still in the wrong plane of existence entirely, and this entire quest had been undertaken to cover for a mistake.

Emet-Selch descended gracefully down the stairway of floating chunks of rock; Luciant took it a little more gingerly, unsure if his teleportation could save him should he slip and fall into the core.

Long silver hair. A coat of deepest night-black. His back turned to them. The flutter of feathers, somewhere beneath the coat. Then, a steely voice: “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Are we not any more or less worthy than your designated opponent?” Emet-Selch retorted. “I should think we may go where we please, given that the crater was open.”

“We just wanna talk,” Luciant added. “Then we’ll leave you alone to do your thing. No more interruptions. Just destiny.”

Sephiroth turned around. He cut an impressive figure, tall and slender, his silver hair cascading down his back.

“Whatever you want to discuss,” he said, “it had better be worth my time. My concerns now are of the planet itself.”

“And mine are of the planets,” Luciant told him, stepping onto his shared platform. “Plural.”

“Or did you not know?” Emet-Selch posed. “Were you not aware? Do you not ALL have the privilege of knowledge of the other worlds? Had you simpered alone, thinking your own rock the pinnacle of – “

“Don’t turn him against us,” Luciant hissed. “The point was that we DON’T have to fight him this time.”

Emet-Selch sighed. “If you insist upon doing this the pedantic way.”

“Gaia is one chapter in a bigger book,” Luciant told Sephiroth. “We’re the head editors, and we think you’d work as a main character. Once this chapter closes, we can get you into the next one.”

“More than one planet,” Sephiroth mumbled. “It sounds like the ravings of lunatics. Not the existence of it, but my tie to it. I am the last of the blood of the Ancients. This planet belongs to me, as does its fate.”

“You hear that, Emet-Selch?” Luciant taunted. “Sephy here doesn’t think he’s GOOD
enough to deal with more than one planet.”

“That was never what I said,” Sephiroth growled.

“Wanna put your money where your mouth is?”

After a pause, Sephiroth asked, “What must I do?”

“Get shot. No, I’m serious. It’s a marker spell. You’ll be summoned when the time comes. Don’t worry. I’ll hit you somewhere non-fatal, as a show of good faith.”

In a rush, a single wing of deep gray extended from beneath Sephiroth’s clothing. “Target this,” he said coldly, “and nothing else.” With the sound of sliding metal, an enormous Masamune glittered, held in a ready stance to strike should Luciant deviate from what he had advertised.

Luciant gave the crossbow a flourishing twirl, then fired off a single bolt that pierced into Sephiroth’s wing. When Sephiroth determined himself unharmed, he declared, “You may go.”

“Geez,” Luciant muttered as he and Emet-Selch ascended the stairway of stone. “Are any of these guys actually fun besides the murder jester?”

“You wouldn’t be seeking more friends, would you?”

“You know it’s not like that.”

“I’m not certain I do. At the very least, I should be proud that you’ve latched onto your true kindred.”

“I’d rather have somebody try to kill you upfront and get it over with than pretend to be nice and then flip out on you for telling the truth,” Luciant muttered.

“Old wounds, reopened?” Emet-Selch guessed.

“They’re just scars. Scars are a better look, anyway. They show the other guy what you can survive.”

The inauguration parade of Galbadia’s sorceress was the perfect cover. Not only were the lights and noise amazing camouflage, but Luciant relished the irony that he was set up on the roof of the highest building in order to snipe a hidden sniper in the dancing décor across the way, one who meant to plant a bullet in Edea’s forehead.

“No, this world knows how to party,” Luciant told Emet-Selch as he loaded his crossbow. “Watch this.”

The illuminated float bearing Edea’s throne passed below. With shaking hand, Irvine Kinneas took aim and blasted a shot that would never hit home.

And at the same time, a purple bolt arced through the air and pierced Irvine’s leather-clad companion Squall without either of them ever noticing.

“No scope,” Luciant bragged. “How d’you like me now?”

He turned to see Emet-Selch regarding him with an almost wistful expression.

“What’s wrong?” Luciant asked.

“Naught that is any concern of yours,” Emet-Selch replied. “We’ve still several worlds to
Two airships careened toward the South Gate as Luciant and Emet-Selch watched them from atop a Gaian cliff. Their target was on the larger, pursued by a smaller skimmer with a Black Waltz on the helm. All the while, the gate was slowly closing on both sides of the tunnel.

“This seems all but impossible,” Emet-Selch said cheekily. “Their speed? The pursuing enemy? The closing gate? You’ll have to wait for another opening.”

“No, I won’t,” Luciant insisted. “Watch and learn how a Keyblade Master does it.”

The two ships passed through the doors sliding slowly shut; Luciant followed them inside, using the same technique he’d utilized back on the more modernized Gaia to teleport from wall to wall inside the tunnel.

The Black Waltz was gaining on the ship. Now, if Luciant didn’t even have a target to turn in to Shinryu, that would be bad. He kept an eye out, running alongside the wall a few feet ahead, letting the ships catch up.

The Waltz charged up a Thundaga that could have blasted the entire other airship.

“No, you don’t,” Luciant muttered, switching No Name back to Key form. “Fire.”

The Black Waltz’s engine burst aflame, which the others thought to be the Waltz’s own carelessness in directing his spell. The skimmer crashed and burned. The airship burst from the other side of the tunnel, the skimmer’s explosion glowing behind.

Riding out on the shockwave, Luciant bounced off the rear gate doors, performed a front-flip, and fired with precision. Zidane Tribal, like most, did not even know he was hit.

“Now you’re just showing off,” Emet-Selch remarked as Luciant returned.

“Largely, I do not question the judgment of Shinryu,” Emet-Selch sighed as he and Luciant rode a small metal vessel across the waters to the enormous Iifa Tree that reached up to touch the bluest skies. “I have merely carried out his orders. After all, it is of little import to me save that I get the job done. And yet I truly, truly cannot understand why this target has been chosen.”

“Kuja?” Luciant repeated. “I dunno, I think someone who goes by ‘Angel of Death’ is a pretty big deal.”

“Well, he’s no Zalera,” Emet-Selch muttered. “Further…” He gave another sigh. “I shall attempt to explain this to you as plainly as I can muster. I have lived eons of life, as those who truly deserve existence should. As we were made to do.”

“You’ve said.”

“I tolerate your presence because I sense you are a being cut of the same cloth. A man on his second of many lives, all congealed into one great existence that transcends history.”

“That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me.”

“Would you like it embroidered on your vest?” Emet-Selch teased. “However, this much you must understand. The lifetime of an ordinary mortal is but a blink of the eye to me. A transient
event. They do not live long enough for me to consider them a true existence. Their lives have no meaning to me, for I do not consider them to have lives. Do you or do you not understand?”

“I understand,” Luciant answered. “That doesn’t mean I like it, but I get it.”

“Now, as for the Genome,” Emet-Selch went on, “his life is but a fraction of a fraction. Born to full adulthood, his emotional maturity stunted, and printed with a clear expiration date. If mortals are but animals, then the Genome is nothing more than an insect! Why must I even bother with such an ephemeral creature?”

“It seems you’ve never been bitten by a poisonous insect,” a voice came from behind the duo. “They kill faster and more painfully than any human can, you know. And I’m no exception.”

Luciant and Emet-Selch whipped about to see the target hovering before them in the air as Kefka had done a few worlds prior, the purple and white fabrics of his elegant clothing flapping in the gentle breeze.

“Okay,” Luciant said, all too amused, “THAT was smooth, and you have to admit it.”

Emet-Selch gave a noncommittal grunt.

“You think I don’t know how transient I am?” the target, Kuja, went on. “I would kill, kill, and kill some more to achieve the longevity you have. However, since that is not currently possible, I suppose I am just killing in order to make it fair.”

“Fair?” Luciant repeated.

“He’s like…reverse you,” Luciant told Emet-Selch in awe.

“What a cheap way to simulate immortality,” Emet-Selch sighed. “The path of least resistance, is it?”

“Why should I lift a finger when it isn’t necessary?” Kuja tossed his silver hair. “Do you make things harder for yourself for bragging rights?”

“Admittedly not,” Emet-Selch replied, “although I am in the company of one who seems to love overcomplicating his moral stance.”

“Look, I’m not actually evil,” Luciant sighed. “I’m just the messenger. I’m trying to get back to where I SHOULD be, and that involves going through you.”

“I’m not a chariot service,” Kuja said flatly.

“But you are a Warrior of Chaos,” Luciant corrected.

“I have preferred ‘Angel of Death,’” Kuja sighed.

“It’s a whole thing,” Luciant explained. “We’ve been going around picking up a laundry list of heroes and bad guys from the multi-world circuit to throw into a cosmic arena, and the big guy wants you. I think he’s just impressed that you’re trying to blow up your entire world.”

“Which seems not to faze you, messenger,” Kuja said with a raised brow.

“Look,” Luciant sighed, “I already saw the most important world go down because it had
to. I didn’t want it to, but as much as it mattered to me, it shouldn’t. I have a destiny. The worlds have a destiny. And that’s all I care about.”

That, and the prospect of seeing the Master, his former friends, again. But that seemed so far in the future that it must be impossible. Besides, his friends had abandoned him long ago. Even without Unions, would they see any reason to return to his side?

“What is the destiny of my world?” Kuja asked. “Have you come to see me succeed, or to stop me?”

“I just came to prep you for what comes after,” Luciant told him.

Kuja scowled. “If there were an ‘after,’ there wouldn’t be a ‘now.’ Were you not paying attention? I am going to die. You knew this. That is why I am undertaking this task in the first place.”

“Well, the guy who sent me after you seems to be convinced you have a little more life in you than you think,” Luciant insisted.

Kuja folded his arms. “What role does your condescending friend play?”

“Plucky sidekick,” Luciant teased.

“NO,” Emet-Selch barked. “My purpose is to apparently stall your death at the hands of higher powers and watch you showboat.”

“I can’t tell which one of you is more annoying, to be truthful,” Kuja said slyly.

Luciant realized that Kuja and Emet-Selch were mirror images in more ways than just the inversion of their motives – the long-lived throwing the mortals to the wind and the short-lived ending them prematurely. They had the same sense of superiority, the same ego. It actually reminded Luciant of the Master, and he was stunned that he hadn’t realized it earlier, particularly in regards to Emet-Selch. Was this why he had insisted the Ascian come with him and call him friend?

“Honestly, you just let us cast one tracker spell on you and we’ll be out of your hair,” Luciant told him. “Though…I will say your whole scheme interests me. How exactly are you planning to off everyone? Door to Darkness?”

“Those are nonsense words,” Kuja replied flatly.

“What are you doing?” Emet-Selch asked.

“I wanna know,” Luciant insisted. “What’s the big plan?”

Kuja sniffed. “It begins with the Iifa Tree, if you must know.”

Luciant blinked. After a pause, “I thought it was Lifa.”

“Everyone seems to. It connects to Memoria. Do you know of Memoria?”

“Is that like Kingdom Hearts?” Luciant asked glibly.

“I repeat: WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING?” Emet-Selch growled. “This was not the assignment! Are you so charmed by this one’s wit that you insist upon taking tea with him in his stateroom?”
“Well, he’s the first one we’ve met who wouldn’t poison the tea or have us thrown out the window,” Luciant pointed out.

“And that is an excuse to waste your time on the ephemeral?”
“I don’t much wish to spend time with you, either,” Kuja huffed. “I can tell you have all the time in the world. You spend it being so wordy, after all.”

“You ill-mannered – “

“Hey, don’t you guys see what’s going on here?” Luciant broke in. “You’re cut from the same cloth, and that’s what’s making friction.”

“How DARE you compare me to one so insignificant,” Emet-Selch growled.

“How dare you compare ME to one who asks how dare you compare him to me!” Kuja argued.

Luciant put his foot down – literally stomping. “I’m the Key to both of you succeeding. One of you gets his heart’s desire, which is probably something to do with Amaurot, I don’t know, and the other one gets a life after death! And without me, you don’t have any of it! So if I say you two are going to get along for one day so I can learn about the Li – the Iifa Tree, then you two are SHAKE HANDS AND PLAY NICE!”

At first, Luciant thought he’d stunned them both into silence. Then he heard Emet-Selch’s softest laugh. “Oh, how far you’ve come,” the Ascian noted. “The whelp I met in the menagerie wouldn’t have dared. Very well. I’ll amuse you. I still won’t recognize any validity in the Genome, as there’s none to be found, but I can play the part of houseguest.”

“I suppose without Brahne, I could use someone to talk to,” Kuja huffed. “I’ll show you my plans. Then, we will go our separate ways.”

“Deal,” Luciant stated.

Kuja’s feet touched down on the deck. “Continue to steer dead ahead,” he urged. “There is much to show you within the tree.”

And so Luciant had managed to win a few hours of simple enjoyment, conversation over death and destruction and the value of chaos. The fact that it kept him so entertained made him wonder if he was as uncomplicated as Emet-Selch claimed. And speaking of the Ascian, if he didn’t know better, he would have bought the act at a couple of points, seeing him commiserate with the Angel of Death over the nature of mortality and who deserved it at all. Luciant’s thoughts went back to what the Primal Shinryu had said about Emet-Selch: Angel of Truth. Angel of Death, Angel of Truth…did that make Luciant anything more than a simple page of the heavens?

At the end of the day, Kuja was marked; Luciant and Emet-Selch made their exit before the heroic interlopers from the earlier airship chase could show up. On the way out, Luciant teased, “I think you liked him.”

“I think you forget my fondness for the theatrical arts,” Emet-Selch replied. “It was a charade. Nothing more.”

“Huh. So that’s what we are.”

“Come again?”
“I’m not an angel,” Luciant muttered. “But the one thing we all have in common is that we’re theater kids.”

“You should try it sometime,” Luciant suggested.

“Try what?” Emet-Selch asked.

“Madness. It’s fun.”

“I should think not.”

“Hey, you got me to come out of my shell. Turnabout is fair play, right?”

Emet-Selch rolled his eyes. “It remains to be seen.”

“That’s not a ‘no’!”

“Let us just proceed to Spira.”

Seymour of the Guado was so consumed by his own sin of Superbia on the day of his wedding to the Lady Yuna that he failed to notice a couple of uninvited guests among his court. Then again, the fact that he’d dressed his men up in nearly identical uniforms that covered the whole body and most of the head didn’t help much when it came to picking out intruders.

“Y’know, this is kinda disappointing,” Luciant muttered to Emet-Selch. “It’s a wedding, and we don’t even get to dress up.”

“How base,” Emet-Selch agreed.

“Y’know, it’s weird not seeing you in a huge coat. You almost look naked.”

“Please refrain from that mental imagery.” A pause: “And also, this fabric feels far too light. Where is it supposed to bear the marks of my accomplishments?”

Shooting the bride was easy; she didn’t notice a thing. From there, it was just hoping that one of the other two remaining targets was going to pull through.

As the brightly-tinted airship blew past the upper decks of Bevelle Palace, Luciant muttered, “Right on time.”

The wedding crashers, led by Yuna’s paramour Tidus, slid down tethers to reach the balconies and fight their way up. Seymour’s guards responded in kind. With so many people shooting at Tidus, he didn’t notice one more arc of purple piercing him.

“The deed is done,” Emet-Selch stated. “We may now proceed forth.”

“No.” Luciant held up his hand. “I wanna see this play out.”

“Der Freischutz, I have put up with diversion after diversion – “

“And been seriously entertained, right? C’mon. It’ll be fun.”
Emet-Selch sighed. “I suppose I have little choice unless I can learn to pry that Key from your hands.”

Ava had once lent Luxu a book that she had called a “bodice-ripper.” Luxu hadn’t really enjoyed it. Too many scenes were lascivious, his Luxuria was not that sort. But he had found the intrigue thrilling when the heroine had nearly married another man, only for the hero to show up and proclaim his love at the last minute, ending the farce.

This was like that, except with a lot more guns.

Luciant gasped when Yuna threw herself off the balcony, physically teleporting himself out to the side of the tower to watch her descent. When she landed on the back of her trusted Valefor, he let out a sigh of relief.

Back atop the balcony, he told Emet-Selch, “She’s fine. She hitched a ride on a Summon.”

“No. I know that’s not your style. I just thought I’d tell you, since…y’know…this is gonna be the last time we see each other. We make our wishes, we go our separate ways. Even if I find
you in my real worldline, it won’t be my you, y’know?”

Emet-Selch gave the softest of sighs. “You were more competent than Elidibus or Lahabrea. I can grant you that much. And more agreeable than Hythlodaeus. If anything, you were more akin to…”

Luciant waited, waited, waited. “Akin to who?” he finally asked.

“It matters not,” Emet-Selch told him.

“Did…you have a friend you lost or something?”

“I will ask you only once not to pry into matters you do not – “

“You did!” Luciant teased. “Emet-Selch, the Ascian without emotions – “

“I never said I was without emotion – “

“Had a FRIEND once! A buddy! A pal! And you just compared me to him! Her? Them?”

“We are dropping this subject IMMEDIATELY,” Emet-Selch growled. “Instead, I give you free reign to talk my ears to rot about your…Daybreak Town.”

Luciant shook his head. “It really was a lifetime ago, now. I don’t think you’d understand.”

“Perhaps I’d understand more than you realize.”

“Why would you?”

Emet-Selch regarded him once again with that sad, wistful gaze. “Have you not spent so much time at my side that you understand? All I say is merely a ruse to get you to lower your defenses and reveal to me an exploitable weakness. I care nothing for your past, der Freischutz.”

Well, that was clearly the lie, all right. “Well, I don’t really even…want to talk about it, anyway. I was a different person. Or maybe…doing this made me realize the person I always was. Or was meant to be. I dunno, I’ll figure it out on the third go.”

He didn’t feel his heart was so empty, anymore. The void the Foretellers had left was filled with memories of Kuja, even of Kefka, and of course, the Master’s void was filled in solidly with Emet-Selch.

“Well, what were you gonna wish for?” Luciant asked.

“That matter is also quite confidential,” Emet-Selch replied. “You should make yours first, when we return. That way, it remains confidential.”

“All right.” Luciant shrugged. “Y’know, I’m just gonna go for broke here. Thanks.”

“And what are you about to accuse me of now?”

“Of helping me figure out how to be better. More confident. Even how you corrupted me to the Dark side.”

“Der Freischutz, you were ALWAYS on that side!”

“I’m, uh…I’m gonna miss you.” Now, that sounded more like the old Luxu than the new
“I would advise you not to,” Emet-Selch told him. “After all, sooner or later, I would have become your liability.”

“Are you…gonna miss me?”

A silence.

“I figured,” Luciant said with a shrug. “You’re not the type. At least thought I’d – “

“At the very least,” Emet-Selch broke in, “I will remember. Perhaps even fondly.”

Luciant gave him a sly smile.

“You like me!”

“Do not put words in my mouth.”

“Sure thing, best buddy.”

They both flinched when the third voice broke in: “Ah, how heartwarming it is to see the bonds between true kindred spirits!”

Slowly, they turned to look up to the throne of Insomnia, where the usurper king reclined, dressed most unprofessionally for a monarch, his purple hair in a tangle.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Ardyn told them. “I wasn’t about to get involved.”

“How long have you been watching us?” Emet-Selch asked.

“Since you invited yourselves into my throne room without acknowledging my presence,” Ardyn stated, grinning.

Luciant rolled his eyes, turning to leave. “Okay, I’m finally getting on task.”

“Oh, don’t you want to get to know another of your ilk?” Ardyn posed. “Sit down for a drink and a chat with another conquistador, the Starscourge himself? I’m certain we have so many stories to share – “

“None of which shall ever be told,” Emet-Selch said curtly. “At least to you.”

He waved Ardyn off, as he usually did when exiting.

“Oh, well,” Ardyn said to himself, quite amused. “If it wasn’t meant to be, then it wasn’t meant to be. At least it means I don’t have any competition.”

Once more, Luciant and Emet-Selch stood before Shinryu’s massive, illuminated form.

“You have performed well, Ascian and Freeshooter,” Shinryu congratulated. “As promised,
a reward for each of you, in the form of any wish.”

Luciant stepped forth, now not even quivering slightly in the dragon’s presence. “Send me to the worldline where I’m supposed to be,” he demanded. “The one my Master wanted me to arrive in.”

“It shall be done,” Shinryu vowed.

The very ground beneath Luciant’s feet opened up into a viscous pool of Darkness. Not expecting to be transported by this particular manner, he gave out a most embarrassing cry as he was sucked down.

Then Luciant der Freischutz was gone from that worldline altogether, to be shone upon by a different Kingdom Hearts.

“And you, Ascian?” Shinryu asked. “What is your wish?”

Emet-Selch smiled.
I have never played Bravely Default. I did my best to research it for this project. This chapter may contain factual errors toward characterization or lore.

A female body, this time. With the same bright orange hair as Luciant, but kept longer. It didn’t seem all that unfitting. At first, Lustre had thought about transitioning, taking on a more masculine name and identity. Yet as people called her “she” and treated her as they would a young girl, she realized that she didn’t find the pronouns all that unfitting, nor did she dislike the clothing.

It made her wonder if Luxu had been as much of a man as he’d thought he was, if she was a woman now. Perhaps there was always a little bit of both, or an in-between, in Luxu. Whatever the case, Lustre decided not to overanalyze it. She liked being Lustre, and she embraced the identity.

Raised by the Septimus family in Eisenberg, she was almost immediately spotted by the mysterious vestal of the Fire Crystal in the temple below her hometown. She hardly had a say, being so young. She was spirited underground and sworn in as a vestaling, taught to worship the crystal and answer to the vestal, for should anything happen to the vestal, Lustre would be the one required to take the position.

It was here that she learned more about her new world. Luxendarc, it was called. The land of light and shadow. That immediately reminded her of the Master’s words. Small as she seemed, she had all of her memories from her two lives past, and she knew that she had to “tip the dominoes” somehow. Cause something to jeopardize Luxendarc’s position holding the balance.

The current vestal, Plutonya Oblige, was strange. Lustre, however, was unable to tell if Plutonya was strange for this world, or if everyone in Luxendarc was a little off-kilter. This was because those who lived in the Fire Temple were rarely allowed to leave.

It was a small, tight-knit community. Plutonya and Lustre had a host of servants and nuns, all women, and an anchorite, who was male, teaching the discipline of summoning the Promethean Fire. Apparently, however, Lustre was the only vestaling. Other vestals – of wind, water, and earth – would take several potential successors. Not Plutonya. Plutonya was adamant that Lustre be the only one.

It was rather nice, to be the favored apprentice for once.

Lustre continued to learn. She was taught of the magical depth of the Fire Crystal, from which she could feel Light radiating, assuring her this was the correct worldline at long last. She had it explained that the vestal was the bride of the Fire Crystal. Fine by her. It wasn’t like she was going to meet anyone more interesting down here. Might as well marry the rock that lit up her life. She had to take on the name “Oblige,” too. All vestals did. It linked them as a family, if not by blood.

She was taught of Cryst-Fairies, which were small, helpful beings that assisted vestals sometimes. Lustre had never seen one, and reasonable doubt that any such creature had ever existed in Luxendarc.
Between lessons, she tested her limits. Her teleportation skills had carried over seamlessly from Luciant. She used this to play tricks on Plutonya, zapping herself from one side of the dark-red-brick building to the other and giggling like she actually was so young. Plutonya took to this as a mother would, wandering the halls and calling out, “Where’s my little Lustre? Where’s my sparkling vestaling?”

Then she would happen upon Lustre’s hiding place and pounce, chuckling, “Clever little sneak!” She swept Lustre up into her arms, blowing a raspberry against the girl’s stomach.

However, given how adept and perceptive Lustre was despite her appearance, she was quick to notice that Plutonya was not the most professional of vestals.

“Was I NOT supposed to set it on fire?” she was heard groaning to the anchorite one morning. “It was frozen. That is how you cook things, right?”

“Perhaps you should, um, leave the cooking to the servants,” the anchorite suggested.

Then there was the time that Plutonya had left Lustre alone in a room filled with ceremonial weaponry. Lustre knew better than to touch it, but she wanted to teach Plutonya a little lesson in child-rearing. Her more Kefka-inspired instincts took over, and she toppled a stack, intentionally slicing the most shallow of cuts on her finger with a blade before setting off a false bawl about it.

Plutonya had rushed to her immediately, apologizing over and over, scooping her up into a hug. She’d been quick to bandage the incision, then, in a familiar old routine, telling Lustre that if she put some butter over the bandage, or perhaps a dash of celery salt, the cut would heal right up. Lustre played along with the joke and laughed.

“Yo, mom!” Lustre called from her room one night. “C’mere for a second!”

“Not now, Lustre! Also, I’m not your mom. Get it straight.”

“It’s kind of an emergency!”

“And I’m kind of working!”

“Fine. I’ll just sit here in bed and let the pipes keep leaking. Maybe I can have a pool party or something with the nuns.”

Plutonya skidded into Lustre’s bedchamber to find it half-flooded, Lustre casually filing her nails atop the bed.

“Oh, NOW you care,” Lustre said, deadpan, not looking to her mentor.

As the servants drained the waters from Lustre’s room, the now-adolescent sighed and gave Plutonya a meaningful glare of derision. “You know you basically are my mom now. You’re the one responsible for raising me into the next vestal. You have to teach me everything.”

“I mean, sure, yeah, when you put it that way,” Plutonya said with a shrug. “And we have fun like a real family, right?”

“Sure we do. So…when are you actually gonna start acting like a responsible mentor?”

Plutonya froze. She slowly turned to look at Lustre like her armor had been completely pierced.
“Because all I see you do is messing around and causing trouble,” Lustre went on. “Or letting bad things happen. Now, I don’t know about most vestalings, but I kinda want a mentor I can trust.”

She stalked away, leaving Plutonya to think over quite a lot.

The next morning, Plutonya sat down to breakfast with Lustre. “Morning,” she greeted. Then, with a scowl, “What I mean to say is that I bid you a good morning. Is all well?”

Lustre nearly choked on her toast. “You didn’t have to swallow a dictionary, mom!”

“Perhaps not,” Plutonya stated evenly. “It is, however, a start, is it not?”

“You’re creeping me out.”

“Too much?”

“Way too much.”

“Sorry, kid.” Plutonya shrugged. “I’ll work on it. Anyway…breakfast?”

“Already eating it.”

“You…want…more breakfast?”

“Do you seriously just not know how this works?”

Lustre loved playing the role of the sassy teenager. It was an easy character to embody, and one that allowed her to practice what Luciant had been working on. Resolve. Confidence. Quick-witted comebacks.

Still, Luxu shined through at times.

“Am I actually worthy to become the next vestal?” she asked Plutonya once.

“You’re the only one I chose for a reason,” Plutonya informed her.

“But is that reason that I was the only person relatively viable? Were you scraping the bottom of the barrel because there weren’t any other girls that would work?”

Plutonya sighed. “It had never occurred to me it would be like this.”

“Like what?”

“Difficult. Unnatural.”

“What is?”

“Being what I should for you.”

Then, one day, it all came crashing down in a terrible avalanche. (Not literally – that might have been a believable event, given how far underground the temple was, but no rockslides were, in fact, involved.)

Plutonya hammered on Lustre’s chamber door in a haste. Lustre, now of age (physically, anyway), pried the door open in a sleepy haze.
“Lustre.” Plutonya put her hands on her apprentice’s shoulders. “This is not going to be easy for me. It never was. But tonight, I must depart.”

“What? Why?”

“If not now, then you may suffer later. And in this time, in this place, I cannot allow that. You are the only chance.”

“You’re making zero sense right now.”

Plutonya pulled Lustre into a tight embrace, then let her go, bolting.

That was the last time Lustre ever saw Plutonya.

As she was presented with the ceremonial garb, she wondered why it always had to be this way. Plutonya had vanished just as quickly as the Master had done. Lustre had to ascend alone.

Only this time, she didn’t know the slightest inkling of where Plutonya had gone, or why. Perhaps this was how the Foretellers had felt, when the Master had made his exit. Confusion. Betrayal.

Lustre should have understood. She should have taken it with grace. But she took it with anger, pounding the walls of her bedchamber with her fists until they bruised.

Then she devoted her life to the crystal, mostly. She prayed to it daily, as needed.

But she couldn’t forget her true goal here.

How was she to rend Luxendarc?

Lustre, in the end, was not a very professional vestal either. She was told to stay in the temple and only leave if necessary.

Well, getting fresh air was necessary, wasn’t it?

Her space-bending skill came in handy as an escape route. She made her way from tunnel to tunnel in blinks, traversing the Underflow to surface into the mines above, and from there, finding the path to the surface so she could look at the sky.

So many stars. So many worlds. Even the ground of Eisenberg had once been the ground of her world, the world of Daybreak Town. Infinite fragments born of one shattering. To think when she and the Foretellers used to watch the stars, they were merely dead fireballs in the void. Now Lustre knew better. A star was so much more than a dead fireball.

On one return trip, she was accidentally spotted; “Hey!”

She froze.

“What are you doing down here?” a small voice asked in awe.

Lustre slowly turned to face the interloper. A small boy, with brown hair. One of the children exploited for the mines. Yet another thing she turned a blind eye to. It wasn’t her problem. If she had to live with one eye blind in order to keep the other focused on the future, so be it.

“I work here,” she said casually.
“Do you mine, too?”

“Maybe.”

The boy tilted his head. “Are you the Fire Vestal?”

“Shhhh!” Lustre hissed. “Don’t tell anyone, okay? I don’t need the heat riding my tail because I left the sacred house of boredom.”

“You don’t speak like I thought the Fire Vestal would.”

“Neither did the last vestal,” Lustre defended. “Just forget you saw me, okay?”

“I will,” the boy said obediently. “Anything to help the Fire Vestal.”

All of a sudden, Lustre remembered her second assignment. The most important one. Find an apprentice. This child already looked up to her. Could he be viable? Could a male be accepted as a vestaling?

“Listen,” she told him softly. “I’m gonna tell you a secret. But you can only tell people if it’s an emergency, okay?”

“What is it?”

“I’m gonna tell you where to find the Fire Temple.”

The boy’s face lit up.

The way Lustre figured it, if she allowed him to come and go, she could tutor him secretly. Figure out if he was worthy of bearing No Name. She quickly whispered the instructions to him, finishing up by zipping her lips in a pantomime.

“Got it!” The boy nodded. “Wait a minute. If the lever is that hidden, how do you – “

“That’s my secret.” Lustre winked. Of course, she just sent her hand a little further away from her body to activate it if needed. And no one ever questioned her leaving, because how could she possibly have returned? “You can come and visit me whenever you want. Just make sure you knock. And do it like this.”

She rapped a very distinctive pattern on the wall.

“Got it!” the boy nodded.

“Do you promise to come visit?” Lustre asked.

“I promise!” the boy said enthusiastically.

“What’s your name, anyway?” Lustre inquired.

“I’m Egil! What’s yours?”

“Lustre Oblige.”

“It’s nice to meet you!”

“You too, kiddo.”
It was probably a good thing that she had gotten delayed talking to Egil. Because when she arrived at the Fire Temple, it was to find the bodies of her servants and nuns scattered about the floor, drenched in their own blood.

At first, Lustre was horrified. Then she just got angry. Someone had had the nerve to come in here and slaughter all of her followers.

Then, back to horrified, because she was likely the target.

Then, back to anger, because she was likely the target.

No Name slid easily into her hand. “Come out, come out, wherever you are,” she taunted. “I know you wanted to kill yourself a vestal today.”

The voice that answered her was cold, collected. “You broke the rules. You left without permission. No one knew where you were. They died protecting a secret they couldn’t even divulge.”

“Show yourself,” Lustre seethed.

So he did. He was tall, fair of face, his dark hair bound by a headpiece and offset by brilliant green robes. The still-bloody katana that had committed the murders was clasped in his hand, its sheath pinned to his sash.

“I hope you realize what this means,” he said, intending to be threatening.

It didn’t work. “I have no idea who you are.”

He raised the sword into an offensive position. “Swordsmaster Nobutsuna Kamiizumi, of the Black Blades.”

“Gesundheit,” Lustre said sarcastically.

“The Fire Crystal must be consumed by Darkness,” Kamiizumi insisted. “To that end, you will perish.”

“My entire job is to stop you from doing that,” Lustre reminded him. “But if you want to play the game, I’ll take a swing at the piñata. Maybe crack it open and find some candy inside.”

With that, she made the first strike, No Name slicing through the air. The katana raised to clash with it.

Lustre took Kamiizumi on a chase around the temple. Just like a game of hide-and-seek with Plutonya, only she was the seeker, hiding herself to attack Kamiizumi from different angles. He matched her wanton strikes, carrying himself with stiffness and stillness as Lustre bobbed and weaved.

“Okay, y’know what?” Lustre sighed. “This is getting old. Let’s try something with more firepower.”

She let No Name transform and was rather confused with the results. She had expected Luciant’s crossbow. What she held instead was a pair of smaller crossbows, one for each hand.

“What sort of vestal are you?” Kamiizumi asked, equal parts shock and condescension.
“The best vestal you’ll ever meet,” Lustre said with a smirk. “The other crystals wish they were married to me.”

Now she was able to attack Kamiizumi from a range, and she pelted him with ammunition, watching him scurry for cover.

“You fail to understand!” he growled from beneath a table that already bore the marks of his missed chops. “If the crystal does not fall, Luxendarc will!”

“Nice try,” Lustre said as she ported herself to the ceiling, holding her skirt down to an appropriate length with one hand as the other let off a barrage of fire.

“It is the truth,” Kamiizumi seethed as the table took the brunt of the damage, threatening to crack. “A great evil approaches Luxendarc, and if Crystal Orthodoxy is not suppressed, all will be lost!”

“Oh yeah? Says who?”

“Braev Lee.”

Now, Lustre knew that name. It was enough to give her pause to stop shooting. On the floor again, she asked, “And what did Braev Lee say was going to happen to the world?”

The table finally gave way; Kamiizumi crawled back from beneath its splintered top as it collapsed down on where he’d been. “I do not know,” he admitted. “Lord DeRosso warned him of a cataclysm, and all he would say is that it was linked to the rise of Crystal Orthodoxy.”

“That just sounds like a bunch of – “

Of something that Lustre desperately hoped was correct. By keeping the Fire Crystal pristine, was she, in fact, ushering Luxendarc toward its own doom? Had she stumbled into the correct position by sheer chance?

About time that happened in her favor for once.

“ – malarkey,” she finished after too long of a pause. “Now get out of my house.”

She spun both crossbows, putting them together for a finisher that rained ammunition from the ceiling. Anything that hadn’t already been destroyed in Kamiizumi’s massacre was decimated, save Kamiizumi himself, who finally cut his losses and bolted.

Standing amongst the corpses of her followers, Lustre caught her breath, her crossbows reverting into No Name once more. She had a lot to process, now, between her losses and the revelation that she was on the right track.

The creak of a closet door. “Is he gone?”

The anchorist. Well, at least she had one companion.

She would gain a few more when her door was knocked upon. “Fire Vestal!” a tiny voice cried out.

Lustre hurried to pry open the gateway. She’d had plenty of time to clean up the bodies, to come to terms with their deaths, to burn them in funeral pyres, to pray to the crystal again. She had forgotten about Egil; maybe he was to lift her spirits a little more.
When she saw that he was accompanied by four other people and a glowing ball of light, she frowned. “Egil,” she sighed, “I told you not to tell anyone else unless it was an emergency. This had better be an emergency.”

“It is,” Egil explained. “Agnès is the Wind Vestal. She needs to talk to you.”

Lustre’s eyes widened. Maybe this was a link to the cataclysm she was attempting to initiate. “…Okay, fine. But who are the rest of these people?”

“My name is Tiz Arrior,” one of them, a brunette boy, spoke up. “These are my friends Edea Lee – “ He pointed to a blonde woman. “You know who Agnès Oblige is – “ A brunette woman. “And he’s – “

“Charmed to meet you.” The white-haired man swept up Lustre’s hand, planting a kiss upon its back. “I had no idea the Fire Vestal would be such a lovely – “

That hand smacked him across the face, leaving a red mark.

“Serves you right, Alternis,” Edea snapped, clearly jealous.

“You’re really ALIVE?” the ball of light cried. “I can’t believe it! I was sure you’d be dead! It’s wonderful to see you alive!”

Lustre squinted at it. Not a ball of light. An actual Cryst-Fairy. They did exist after all. She was almost pure white, with hair that cascaded past her waist and wings like those of butterflies. Though, strangely enough, emblazoned with a symbol that would soon become as vital to Lustre and her succeeding lives as the number seven.

It was a clear “13.”

“I think we have a lot of explaining to go over,” Lustre sighed.

“It seems we do,” Agnès agreed.

She let the traveling party into her home. The anchorist served tea. As it turned out, a Darkness threatened the world. The crystals were being blanketed in it, ushering in a potential apocalypse, as a deadly council worked tirelessly to make sure it would come to pass. A council led by Braev Lee.

Now, this didn’t make much sense. Either Kamiizumi had lied to Lustre, or Agnès had. The former seemed more likely, given that he’d wanted to slaughter Lustre, but she wanted to wait to move until she had all of the facts.

After all, there was something rather suspect about this group as well. Tiz looked innocent enough. Edea smiled and laughed often. Alternis Dim wouldn’t wipe that stupid look off his face, hoping it would seduce Lustre immediately. But the Cryst-Fairy, Airy, she had a very sour expression whenever Lustre took note of her, almost as if she was angry that Lustre were here. Angry that Lustre were still alive when an assassination attempt had been laid.

Lustre couldn’t help but wonder if the two were linked.

Agnès went on to explain how the crystals of Wind and Water had been purified already, though Olivia Oblige was lost in the fight. (Lustre had no idea who that was, save the name “Oblige” suggesting a vestal or vestaling. She smiled and nodded like she had a clue.) Agnès had
come for Fire –

“But it seems like you’ve already taken care of that,” the Wind Vestal said in mild surprise.

“Keep it clean and shiny every day,” Lustre confirmed. “Just like my teeth.”

“So it does not require purification?”

“Nnnnnope.”

“No attacks from fiends such as Chaugmar?”

“What, you mean that thing I served flambé last week?”

“That is wonderful!” Agnès cried. “That means only Earth remains, and then our task will be complete!”

Which task? That was what Lustre wondered. The task of saving Luxendarc, or plunging it into oblivion?

“You should come along with us!” Tiz asserted.

“I wouldn’t argue,” Alternis said in a sultry tone.

“That’s almost enough reason for me to say no right off the bat,” Lustre grumbled. “But let’s be real here. I need out of this stuffy house. Luxendarc needs its savior. We wouldn’t want the Wind Vestal to get burnout from pulling quadruple weight, would we?”

“We would be honored to welcome you on our quest!” Agnès cried.

“We’ve got to check in with Commander Goodman first,” Edea told Lustre.

“You’re going to have to assume I have no idea who anyone or anything is,” Lustre sighed. “They never let me leave, remember?”

“Of Starkfort?” Edea clarified. “We can explain on the way.”

Lustre stood, brushed off her white skirt. “Let’s get this show on the road already!”

They stopped for a bite at a tavern on a massive floating ship, dead in the water, that had been converted into a colony. The proprietress had encouraged them to order anything they wanted off the menu, and also to disregard the creaking, as that was just a noise you got used to here on Grandship.

As the meals were set out, Edea looked at Agnès’ porridge and toast, remarking, “Agnès, you eat like a sparrow!”

“I lived on modest means at the temple,” Agnès explained, “and I still get full very easily. I’m certain Lustre is the same way.”

“Speak for yourself.” Lustre was shoveling spiced shrimps into her mouth. “This is the best I’ve ever eaten in my life.” Her life as Lustre, anyway. “Listen, you spend twenty-some years starving on toast down in an underground temple, you fall prey to the deadly sin of gluttony. … You gonna eat that, Alternis?”
“Yes!” Alternis whipped his plate away. “Don’t ask again!”

“So what’s everyone’s deal?” Lustre asked. “I mean, I know your DEAL, but I came in late to the party, okay? What makes you all tick?”

Nervous glances were exchanged; they all wondered who should speak first.

“I met Agnès after my brother Til died,” Tiz began. “We liberated Egil from the Canary Boys because he reminded me of Til.”

Boring, Lustre thought.

“I simply want to save the world, as Airy has told me how to do,” Agnès added. “It was because of the crystals’ instability that Tiz’s home village was destroyed.”

Also boring.

“I…may not have been completely honest with you,” Edea said nervously. “I am…actually Braev Lee’s daughter.”

After a pause, Lustre said, “No duh.”

“You knew?”

“I mean, you had to be part of the Lee family somehow. This is a surprise to me how?”

“I guess that’s a good point,” Edea laughed. “This has been a chance for me to get away from my father. To learn about the world for myself.”

“And I am her loyal guardian,” Alternis stated. “I have known Edea since youth, ever at her side, never to falter. And I shall remain resolute in my conviction to protect her from all harm! Including that of Braev Lee!”

“Well, you know me,” Lustre volunteered, finding nothing actually interesting in any of these backstories. Had she already become so desensitized to people who weren’t trying to destroy the world for one reason or another? “I’m just along for the ride. What about the Cryst-Fairy over there? Wasn’t even sure they existed until I saw her.”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Airy chimed in. “Nobody ever bothers to mind me around here. I’m just trying to prevent the apocalypse, that’s all.”


“Supposedly a greater good,” Edea huffed. “That’s what he always told me. But now I can see through his lie.”

Someone had lied, all right, and Lustre still wasn’t entirely certain who and when. She spooned some of her lobster bisque up, ignoring the burns she was accumulating on her tongue from the hot soup. “Great. Now we’re just one big happy family on a quest to save the world.”

They were so…dull. Alternis seemed to be the only one with any sort of charm, and even that was limited.

Lustre’s feast was sadly interrupted when a pair of Grandship natives burst into the tavern to inform everyone that Grandship was, in fact, sinking.

“What?” Alternis was taken aback. “No!”

“What do you mean ‘no’?” Lustre countered. “Do you WANT to die on a sinking ship?”

“Lustre has a point,” Airy chimed in. “If she and Agnès die, there will be no vestals remaining to purify the Earth Crystal!”

Meaning something had happened to the Earth Vestal. How convenient, Lustre thought.

“But we cannot leave so many innocents to their doom in the depths!” Alternis insisted.

“We’re not heroes,” Lustre argued. “I mean, we are, but we’re not THAT kind of hero. We can’t just drop everything to try and save every human being we come across.”

“Is that not the conviction of a knight?” Alternis asked. “Is it not the conviction of a romantic? If the chance arises, why not take it? Why not protect those who can be protected?”

“Because sometimes,” Lustre argued, slamming her hands on the table as she leaned toward Alternis, teeth gritted, “you gotta let people DIE to get to the right DESTINY!”

“What is that destiny worth, if innocent lives must be lost to obtain it?” Alternis questioned. “I say no! For a destiny is only worth as much as there are people to benefit from it! We will right the ship, and its people will be able to embrace the destiny to come!”

“That’s not how destiny works!” Lustre seethed.

“Let’s go!” Tiz had cried, and Edea, Alternis, and Agnès were rushing after him, attempting to find a way to stop the ship’s downfall.

Lustre let out a long, low groan.

“They’re never going to listen to you, you know,” Airy said, singsong. “You’re just a fifth tag-along to them. Think about how long they knew each other before you came along. You’re not part of their destiny.”

“I figured that on my own, thanks,” Lustre replied. “What’s it to you, anyway? Are you trying to get me to break off from them or something?”

“Why would I ever?” Airy retorted. “I’m just pointing out what I see happening in front of my eyes! But honestly, it’s them who should break away from you, if anything! You’re the only one who understands the true importance of this mission!”

“…I’ll keep it in mind,” Lustre said, hoping the suspicion didn’t show through her voice. That conversation had been a crimson field of waving red flags. “Anyway, we have to join up with them sooner or later. Let’s rock and roll.”

“Let’s what?”

“…Go. Let’s go.”

Lustre led the way out of the tavern, Airy in tow.

When Grandship was transformed into an airship via its salvation and used as the means to pierce Eternia, Lustre refused to eat her words.
“The only thing she won’t eat, apparently,” Alternis laughed before receiving another slap from Lustre.

Lord DeRosso had decided it would be amusing, apparently, to lock his castle with a puzzle. Lustre didn’t appreciate that.

All the same, her little band of heroic brethren solved it, and inside they went, reading the inscriptions from his myriad of paintings. Lustre, at first, didn’t see the significance. Why did the history of this man matter so much?

Then they arrived at the one that gave Lustre some perspective.

“According to this portrait,” Agnès observed, “Lord DeRosso is incredibly old. Even… ancient.”

A booming voice from the shadows: “Yes, indeed, for I was born of these frozen lands in a time two thousand, four hundred years from this day.”

Lustre choked on her own saliva.

She’d been gone that long? Her jaunt as Luciant had left the proper worldline without the Master’s sixth apprentice for millennia? What if she’d already failed through her absence? What if the time had already come and gone for the clash of Light and Darkness she was supposed to foster?

She almost didn’t even notice when DeRosso himself showed up.

In the dullest monotone imaginable, he instructed the others on a brief history of his land. It was enough to make Lustre long for Emet-Selch to come and condescendingly explain Eternia in his own words, with his dramatic flourishes and sly reveals.

What knocked her further off-kilter, though, was DeRosso’s explanation that his family had in fact served the Eternian kings of the past for generations.

Generations.

She had been gone far too long as Luciant.

Was there anything left for her to do?

DeRosso was in the midst of explaining something about his time as a cardinal, or maybe avoiding that subject, Lustre wasn’t sure, when she yelled, “WILL YOU STOP RAMBLING, OLD MAN?”

Everyone in the vicinity flinched.

“Just shut UP!” Lustre cried. “CAN IT! We don’t CARE! We just want in on the Earth Crystal, so we can get this OVER WITH!”

“Are you certain that is what you wish?” DeRosso asked. “Do you know the consequences if it is purified?”

“Apparently, the world ends.” Lustre’s hands were shaking. Generations, generations, generations… “Like I care. It’s a scare tactic. That’s all it is. And even if it does end the world, then just let it happen already! Twenty years underground, and I come out to this? Is there even
“Lustre!” Agnès cried. “What is the matter?”

“Two…thousand…years…” Lustre’s eyes were wide, glistening with the origins of tears.

“These words should not trouble you.” Though the statement was of concern, DeRosso’s monotone stripped it of all heart.

“They do,” Lustre insisted. “Tell me…why I should care…about the crystals. Why should I care anymore?”

This wasn’t Lustre. It wasn’t Luciant. It was a reversion all the way back to Luxu. Luxu’s fragility. Luxu’s vulnerability. Luxu’s worthlessness.

“I do not give that information to just anyone,” DeRosso told her. “Only those I deem worthy. In a test of strength – “

Click.

Lustre held a crossbow in each shaking hand. “I’ll do it myself if I have to,” she seethed, now crying actively. “I’ll beat you into a pulp. Just tell me.”

Alternis placed a hand on Lustre’s arm. “Lady Lustre, you don’t have to – “

She shrugged him off violently enough to send him to the ground.

DeRosso stared Lustre down for an indeterminable amount of time. Her fingers tensed on the triggers, ready to open fire. Now she had Promethean Fire at her beck and call, to boot, and if DeRosso thought she was above summoning an entire train to engulf him in hellfire, he was an utter fool.

The fight never took place. “I can see the strength in your eyes, disguised as weakness,” DeRosso said. “You wish to know that you have purpose. You will risk all, to the bitter end, to find it, though it seems you believe it has been stolen from you permanently. You refuse to accept defeat. Not knowing what purpose you seek, I cannot reassure you. But I can give you an answer to a question. Perhaps not the answer to the question you seek.”

Slowly, Lustre lowered the crossbows. “Make it short this time. Or they come back out, and they fire.”

“Sage Yulyana was once my mortal enemy,” DeRosso explained. “We set our differences aside when we were visited by an angel, fallen from the heavens. We tended to her mortal wounds. She muttered nothing but incoherencies until the very end. That was when she told us she had survived the end of all, and our Luxendarc was in the same peril as hers.”

“And then what?”

“She warned of a traitor. Of someone who would exploit the crystals to bring about the end.”

“There’s always a traitor,” Lustre growled. “Who is it? The truth.”

“I cannot say,” DeRosso replied.

“Because you don’t know or you don’t want to?”
“All I can tell you is the angel’s dying words,” DeRosso stated calmly. “In barely a whisper, she said to Yulyana and myself, ‘Fairy is flying.’ And then she was no more. Since then, Yulyana and I have worked to ensure this end never comes to pass. Perhaps confiding in Braev Lee was the wrong choice.”

“My father?” Edea gasped. “So the greater good he was trying to achieve…was stopping the crystals from destroying the world?”

“But that does not make any sense,” Agnès argued. “The crystals are connected to Luxendarc. It is their corruption, not their purification, that destroys places such as Norande.”

“Braev Lee is full of it,” Airy huffed. “And so is this guy.”

“Airy!” Tiz scolded.

“You’re really gonna trust a vampire over the entirety of crystalism?” Airy posed. “For all we know, he’s making it all up! He’s not even that old!”

“I hope to every god there is,” Lustre seethed.

“I have said my piece,” DeRosso stated. “I will say no more.”

And in a bright light, he vanished.

Outside the inn they’d chosen to stay in for the night, Lustre leaned against the rear wall and sobbed, sinking down to sit against the wall. She embraced her own knees, pulling them up to her chest.

She’d already failed. Nothing left. Likely the Keyblade War had come and gone, and the worlds stood as they were thanks to her ineptitude. The Master should never have chosen her.

“What’s wrong, Lustre?”

“GO AWAY,” Lustre bellowed at the hovering Airy.

“Are you afraid of something? That something you want is out of your reach?”

“I’ve had ENOUGH,” Lustre yelled, giving a swat. “Don’t you DARE try and trick me right now.”

“Trick you? Why would I ever?”

“Do you think I’m STUPID?” Lustre rose. “Maybe those other four are, but I’ve seen it from the start. One side or the other was lying. You’re already horrible at it. Every time you look at me, it’s like I drowned your goldfish.”

“Goldfish don’t drown, silly. They – “

“I. Don’t. CARE. Whatever this ‘angel’ was that DeRosso saw, it told him there was a traitor. And she didn’t say ‘fairy is flying.’ How did he go two thousand years without realizing he misheard her? What she said was ‘Airy is lying.'”

The Cryst-Fairy was silent for a while.

“But I’m not gonna try and stop you from doing whatever it is you were supposed to do,”
Lustre insisted. “Two thousand years is too long. Nothing matters anymore. I’ll never see him again. I’ll never see any of them again.”

A long silence.

Then, at last: “You were never truly from Luxendarc, were you? You were an anomaly.”


No. She’d called Airy’s bluff. Now Airy was calling hers. She switched the question midsentence: “How did you know?”

“This isn’t the first Luxendarc,” Airy explained. “I’ve already destroyed tens of thousands of Luxendarcs. Well, I didn’t destroy them. I just pierced the barrier so Ouroboros could do that. It’s the same routine every time. It gets almost boring, but it’s fun to watch the changes. Sometimes, Agnès breaks through to the next Luxendarc to try and issue a warning to Yulyana and DeRosso. Sometimes, Alternis is called ‘Ringabel.’ Sometimes, he’s a lot more serious. There are all sorts of changes, because every Luxendarc is a little different. Almost like being in different worldlines, except they’re all adjacent. There’s only one thing that ever stays the same, and that’s the Fire Vestal. She’s never alive by the time we get to the temple. You’re never alive. She dies in many different ways, but she’s always dead. I don’t even think you’re supposed to exist.”

“So that’s why you’ve been looking at me like that,” Lustre realized.

“But I think you’re more valuable to me than the other four, really,” Airy urged. “You’re the only one who understands the importance of the cause above all else. If you were pledged to Ouroboros, you would make such a wonderful herald!”

“I might as well be,” Lustre seethed. “I would’ve been all in, before. I was supposed to tip the dominoes over. Get Luxendarc off the board, or at least one of them. I’m guessing that’s why I ended up here in the first place. But now, it doesn’t matter. Let Oro-whatever eat Luxendarc. Let him eat all of them. Or don’t. I don’t care.”

“But why do you not care anymore?”

“Because the entire point was to prep for the Keyblade War,” Lustre explained. “And the Keyblade War already happened.”

“No, it didn’t…”

Lustre’s heart skipped a beat. “What did you say?”

“I know the event you’re talking about,” Airy told her. “Seven Lights? ThirteenDarknesses? Everyone knows. If it goes wrong, it’s the only thing that can destroy even Ouroboros. I always thought that was stupid. How can twenty people demolish an entire universe?”

“It’s been two thousand years,” Lustre reminded Airy. “Generations before that. There’s no way the Keyblade War – “

“I’m telling you, it hasn’t happened! How long are you going to keep not believing me?”

“You’re lying again,” Lustre accused.

“So what?” Airy folded her arms. “If I am, then at least you’ll have something to keep you going instead of being a sad sack. I’m not, by the way. You can still knock out the thirteenth-to-last
“Is that what the number on your wings means?”

“You noticed. You really are the only smart one. But if you take out this Luxendarc, I can get rid of the rest, easy. Then no more balance! Then you go do whatever else it is you need to do until the Keyblade War happens.”

Lustre didn’t know what to believe anymore. However, there was only one belief she could adopt that would give her any sense of hope. “Tell me what I need to do,” she demanded, resolve hardening.

“We know you’ve been lying!” Edea cried.

She, Tiz, Alternis, and Agnès stood before Airy on an open field. The Cryst-Fairy hardly even looked perturbed.

“Where’d you get a silly idea like that?” she asked.

“It isn’t obvious?” Alternis asked. “The signs were there from the very beginning!”

“And DeRosso’s story put everything in place,” Agnès said.

“Not to mention everyone telling us not to activate the Earth Crystal!” Tiz insisted.

“Okay, fine,” Airy sighed. “So I told a white lie. It’s not like that’s gonna change anything.”

“We must put an end to this!” Alternis cried, drawing a blade. “You will never have the chance to manipulate another vestal!”

“Do I even need to?”

Airy’s question caught them all off guard. “The Earth Crystal isn’t activated yet,” Tiz reminded her.

“Yeah, but aren’t you missing somebody?”

Then they realized.

“Lustre!” Agnès cried. “What did you DO to her?”

“Did you brainwash her?” Alternis accused. “MURDER her?”

“Of course not!” Airy snapped. “I just told her the truth, and she decided on her own!”

Gigas Lich dropped to the ground, singed by an infernal conflagration. Lustre Oblige ascended the gray stairway to the darkened Earth Crystal as the shimmering, prismatic white fabric of the sacred vestment billowed about her upper thighs.

She put up both hands to the crystal, willing.

A lattice of cracks appeared in the shell that sealed the crystal away, revealing a piercing yellow glow.
“At least I had one friend in this stinkin’ place,” Lustre said with a smirk. “I owe ya this one, Airy.”

The shell fell away. The Earth crystal blazed brightly.

“NO!”

The Holy Pillar rose from beneath the meadow, consuming Airy and her opponents.

Then it reacted.
Myst d'Aimair

Chapter Notes

The timeline doesn’t exactly mesh with canon here. Use your own imagination to decide.

There were more lives lived between Lustre and Myst. Some were as men, and some were as women.

Nothing of much import happened, however, until Myst d’Aimair.

She lived in a sleepy little town, an ordinary suburb with a beachfront. Small and dull. It seemed this go-around would be just as boring as Myst’s last few runs. No apprentices had revealed themselves, no new sources of Darkness had been revealed, and all Myst (though not as Myst specifically) had done was mess around, causing chaos for fun and making a friend here and there.

Knowing now to look for the Airies of her world, not the Alternis Dims.

She had taken the trumpet back up. It was difficult to re-learn after spending a few centuries away from it. But what else was there to be done? There was nothing unusual about this world whatsoever.

Well, save for the monsters in the mountain.

It seemed that something had happened to shatter the peace between humans and monsters long before Myst had arrived. Meaning that she’d missed all the interesting parts already. The monsters had been driven into a hollow mountain by the humans, who harbored a resentment toward the creatures made purely of magic.

Why had this conflict even happened? Myst neither knew nor cared. She was just so incredibly bored.

Up until the day that she felt was special for no good reason.

It began as an ordinary Saturday; she was relieved for the weekend from duty at the bagel shop. (Working there had given her quite an addiction to bagels. How had she never had a bagel before until this lifetime? They were so versatile, sweet or savory depending on what you wanted.) She woke up late, having set no alarm. It felt good.

She rolled out of bed, tugging on a red blouse and a white skirt. Her deep-blue hair was pinned up atop her head in a messy bun. Then she trudged downstairs to check over the newspaper on her doorstep.

Nothing indicated any cosmic phenomena signaling the Keyblade War was to begin.

So she rifled through her sheet music, picking out a page that looked particularly complex. With that, she approached the trumpet sitting on the table.
The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with determination. To do what, exactly? Play the trumpet? No, she wanted a different goal, something bigger. But what was there to be done?

Well, she could still search for an apprentice. That was something she had yet to do. But no one had caught her eye. Children were just such nuisances in general. As were most teenagers. How had she not annoyed the Master so much when she was that age? Or perhaps she had, and he’d never told her the truth about it.

Myst lifted the trumpet to her lips, playing a triumphant tune.

When she’d had enough music for one day – making her way through her setlist, and then freestyling a little – she strolled downtown to pick up some extra groceries. Fantasizing about robbing the shop at gunpoint, knowing all the while she would risk too much in such an action to be worth the thrill.

All the while, there seemed to be some sort of commotion on the other side of town. Probably a parade or something. It wasn’t like Myst kept track of community events. She wasn’t really a fan of the community in general.

Back home, a few more sets of the trumpet, fixing herself dinner. Then back to sleep to enjoy another lazy Sunday.

Sunday morning – or, more accurately, Sunday early-afternoon – was when Myst decided she really needed to take it upon herself to find an apprentice. Even if she needed to leave town.

Several blocks away, two teenagers who had recently acquired their drivers’ licenses decided it would be fun to have a race across town in their shiny new cars. These were the sort who adhered to the “No cop, no stop” philosophy. Not even a red light would stymie them so long as the coast looked clear.

A road trip, Myst resolved. Just a short one. Get out of town, see what fare there was in the surrounding areas. Be back before sundown in order to clock in for bagels the following day.

Her dingy red car always seemed to have something wrong with it. Myst had gotten accustomed to not caring. This time, the Check Engine light was flaring as brightly as Shinryu in the dark.

Now there was an old memory.

But the Check Engine light always did that. Myst hardly cared. She backed the car out of her driveway and began the quest.

The two teens began their race.

Myst sighed. How far she’d fallen from the sort of quests a Keybearer usually undertook. Back in the days of Daybreak Town, she would be searching a holographic projection of a fairy-tale realm for particles of starlight, not steering a metal carriage through sleepy afternoon streets in the hope that someone who ran a convenience store might be worthy of wielding the Keyblade.

She wanted a bagel.

Myst’s car pulled up to an intersection, stopping at the light. Then, Myst noticed, the
vehicle needed to “pop” a few times before it could sufficiently get rolling again. Maybe there actually was something more urgently wrong with it this time. She put that at third priority. Bagel, apprentice, get car serviced. It wasn’t like anyplace would be open on a Sunday anyhow in this town.

The problem came when the car battery died entirely between that intersection and the next.

The next intersection was larger, warranting an electric stoplight. Myst felt a bitter panic when she realized the car had gone completely out on her, now coasting down the road with no control over anything but direction. However, she let out a sigh of relief as the light turned green before her. She could coast the car through with no interruption, then get it to peter itself out on the side of the road.

The red car began to cross the square.

And the two speeding racers, thinking the coast clear, rammed it head-on.

“Get back up, Myst d’Aimair. We both know you aren’t done.”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with determination. To do what, exactly? Play the trumpet? No, she wanted a different goal, something bigger. But what was there to be done?

Wait.

Had she done this before?

Myst flinched. She had done this before. On Saturday. Today was Sunday. Today –

Today, she’d just died in a car crash. She had felt it. And yet here she was, looking at the glittering trumpet again.

“Okay, what?” she asked herself.

She picked the trumpet up from the table, turning it over and over in her hand, examining it. It didn’t seem like an object capable of time travel. It was an ordinary trumpet. And yet it had somehow brought Myst back to the day before her untimely death.

Well, she wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The setback was that she was once again out of groceries, and needed to replenish her stock with what she would have had, had she survived Sunday. So she set out into town again.

Though simply reliving the same day again was such a boring thought. Couldn’t there be any fun had with this? Could she not use this opportunity to shake things up a little?

She recalled a sort of commotion that she hadn’t investigated the day before. Maybe this was the universe telling her she needed to check that out.

The people had gathered in the field outside the mountain. What Myst saw made her greatly regret not having taken a gander the last time she’d lived this day.
There was a monster. And it was holding a dead human child in its arms.

“ONE OF THEM ESCAPED!” a man cried.

“IT KILLED THAT CHILD!” a woman screamed. “KILL IT!”

The monster, which was rather tiny and looked like a scared goat, turned tail and tried to run back to the mountain. However, the mob caught up to it.

Myst flinched. She knew exactly what the people were doing to the small monster. But this was just the sort of thing that happened. People die. Destiny marches on.

Without being perturbed over either the dead human child or the surely-now-dead monster child, Myst proceeded to shop for her necessities and bring them back home, where she played the trumpet obnoxiously until dinnertime.

The following day, she stayed home, and on Monday, she had her car serviced.

And nothing happened for twenty years.

Well, one thing happened. Myst became a substitute teacher to help pay the bills with something more than bagel money. And also to scope out the town’s children, seeking that ever-important apprentice.

All this achieved, truly, was reminding her that she hated children.

They were loud. They were unruly. They called her rude names. They talked dirty and used words they definitely shouldn’t have known at that age. They got hurt too easily. They caused messes.

Why couldn’t they all be like Myst had been as a child – reincarnated adults who knew enough to behave?

After one particularly frustrating day in which she’d just given the entire class detention and packed them off to be someone else’s problem, she could hardly wait to depart for home. After today, she needed a bagel. Desperately.

But no, a bagel wouldn’t fix it. Myst needed something bigger than that. She needed a thrill. She needed to be bad. She had spent so much time in this town being just as boring as it in order to match the picture. What would Airy or Emet-Selch do in this situation? Not just let everything proceed chaos-less, that was what.

But what could she do that wouldn’t make enormous waves?

Steal supplies. That was always an option.

She slipped into the nearest closet, hand fumbling for the light switch. There had to be some goodies in here – either of the teacherly sort or the janitorial sort. Markers? Pencils? Ammonia? A mop? Whatever happened, it would be something to take without asking, and Myst realized this was the most alive she’d felt in two decades.

That was really rather sad.

Also, the light switch seemed to have disappeared somehow. Befuddled, Myst kept groping
around for it, only for her hand to meet smooth plaster. Maybe it was one of those old-fashioned chain lights. Running on this theory, Myst proceeded further into the dark closet, letting the door shut behind her. This deprived her of all light, but at least that would only be a temporary state. As soon as she found that light –

She tripped. A simple accident, one that anyone could set off.

And suddenly she was falling into a great black void that shouldn’t have been there.

“hey. hey lady.”

Myst was lying facedown on hard stone. Someone was addressing her. Not very politely, at that.

“wake up. naptime’s over.”

She managed to grumble out the words “Shut…up.”

“good. you’re alive. that’s a good thing.”

Myst slowly pulled herself off the ground, taking stock of her situation.

Everything was dark. As if the Keyblade War had already been lost. The only light she could make out seemed to be radiating from the earth itself, showing her she was standing on a gray stone path in the midst of the void.

All else was Darkness. Well, except for the skeleton.

The one who’d addressed her didn’t seem to have flesh. All the same, despite being nothing but bone, he was rather rounded in shape, short and squat. Almost only half Myst’s own height, in fact. He was dressed in sweatpants and a blue hoodie.

It was rather a lot to take in at once.

Myst thought it over, then voiced the only thought she could muster: “Finally, something INTERESTING happens around here.”

“personally, i hate interesting,” the skeleton told her. “interesting usually means people want me to do stuff. i’m more of an inaction kind of guy.”

“Thaat’s nice,” Myst sighed.

“You’re a human person, aren’t you?” the skeleton realized. “don’t see many of those down here.”

“Am I in the mountain?” Myst asked. “No, that’s a dumb question. Of course I’m in the mountain. Literally the only place I could be right now is in the mountain. That’s the only place I would run into a monster.”

“That’s cool, except for the part where i’m not a monster.”

“You don’t have skin,” Myst pointed out. “I don’t see how that makes you ‘not a monster.’”

“actually, i’m a darkner,” the skeleton corrected. “monsters are something different. they’re
made of magic. You can probably kill them in one hit if you really mean it, because they’re made of magic. You could also probably kill me in one hit if you really mean it, but that’s just because I’m not strong and I don’t care about it.”

“All right, I’ll bite,” Myst sighed. “What’s a Darkner?”

“It’s a person who lives in the dark world.”

After a lengthy silence, Myst growled, “Are you going to explain to me what that is?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a world of darkness.”

And silence again.

“Wow,” Myst groaned. “Real helpful, skeleton man. Lemme just see if I got the details straight: I am NOT in a world where there are blue skies, humans roaming freely, and a school full of the most annoying pests you’ll ever meet in your life.”

“Pretty much. Except I think we do have a school down here. Somewhere. Maybe.”

“Y’know what?” Myst realized. “This actually has potential!”

An entire world of Darkness, and yet it seemed to be different from the Realm of Darkness she was always cautioned about by those who knew the ways of the worlds. Perhaps this was something she could use to tip the balance, as the Master had requested long ago. Perhaps this was where she found her apprentice.

“Any other unhelpful tips before I get moving?” Myst asked the skeleton.

“Hmmm, lemme think.” After some time, he remarked, “Nope. Nothing unhelpful.”

“Let’s just leave it there, then.”

“Can I get your name? Just ‘cause it’s not every day we see one of you.”


“Nice to meet you. I hope landing up here from wherever you were from wasn’t too much of a…myst-ery.”

“I’m done,” Myst declared before pushing past the skeleton and beginning to stride further into the void.

“I’m sans, by the way.”

“Don’t care!”

“Wow. This must be like a real ‘daymare’ for you.”

“STOP TALKING.”

“Oh, the human-ity.”

“NOT LISTENING!”

The skeleton muttered something else, probably about how if Myst really weren’t listening,
she wouldn’t be answering. But by that time, Myst was out of earshot.

Her travels took her through winding paths of stone, with only an abysmal darkness overhead. Then, at last, something that looked like civilization. A town confined to a bailey was built of angular houses. At the far end of the bailey, a jet-black castle rose, nearly indistinguishable from its surrounding darkness – though the lights emitting from the windows made its outline clearer.

“Might as well,” Myst said with a shrug as she entered the castle.

They didn’t seem to notice that she didn’t belong. She had entered a ballroom in which a grand festivity was being thrown, a convergence between royal families. They seemed to be divided into four distinct styles of clothing, with motifs reminiscent of card suits – clubs, spades, hearts, diamonds. Myst’s own red-and-black dress of the day almost seemed to blend in.

She spotted an open buffet table across the room. As most everyone was dancing, the table was unattended. “Well, don’t mind if I do,” Myst proclaimed as she strutted up to the lineup of food.

It was mostly sweets – candies, cakes, donuts. Well, Myst could work with that. A jelly donut was almost like a bagel with extra jam, anyway. There were also small sandwiches for more nutritional value, and in the center, a great bowl of salad from which guests could take portions – though, upon inspection, it wasn’t a salad so much as just an aggregation of lettuce. Iceberg lettuce. Only iceberg lettuce.

Myst moved down the line, filling her plate up with chocolates, mints, several of the donuts, two sandwiches –

And then realized there was someone sleeping on the buffet table.

Not just anyone at that. The skeleton from earlier. Sans. Myst flinched, nearly dropping her whole plate. How did he get here before her? Was he invited? Well, he was asleep, so it wasn’t like Myst really cared. “Whatever,” she muttered, picking from the plates around him and leaving him to snore.

Then she took her place along the wall, biting into a donut while she watched the royals spin and twirl.

“Pardon me, my lady, but I could not help but notice you standing here all alone. Perhaps you are in need of company?”

Myst rolled her eyes. The interloper was heart-shaped, literally, his robes patterned with more hearts. A laughably tiny crown balanced atop his crimson head. King of Hearts, she supposed. Just another Alternis type when you got down to it.

Though she was in need of some information, and this was a rather simple way to get it. If the King got handsy, she had No Name.

“Actually, I was kinda hoping somebody could give me a tour,” Myst told him. “You gonna be that somebody, or do I have to go pick somebody handsomer?”

“There are none handsomer than I,” the king said coyly as he put out his arm for Myst to take. “Come with me, and I shall show you the grounds. Handsomely.”

“Yeah, no. Not taking that arm. I put work into making this plate, and I’m gonna finish it.”
Of course, my lady.” The King bowed. “We shall proceed separately.”

He led her away from the ballroom. “You don’t appear to be a Darkner,” he observed. “You appear more as a human.”

“You got a problem with that or something?”

“Why, good heavens, no. After all, who’s perfect? Me. I’m perfect. But there’s no need for you to be.”

This was probably going to be the longest tour of Myst’s life. Including all the prior ones.

But it was worth it, as the final stop was an outdoor courtyard. Myst flat-out dropped the plate, the remaining cakes spilling their icing onto her shoes. From the center of the yard, a great fountain of pure, unspoiled Darkness geysered into the void above, disappearing into the heavens.

“Now, THAT’S what I call a landmark,” Myst remarked. “What can you tell me about this baby?”

“The Fountain of Darkness!” the King of Hearts explained. “The source that gives this world its form! Without it, we would all simply wither away and perish.”

“Huh.” Myst cocked her head. “Is it the only one, or…?”

“Well, as of now, it is,” the King told her. “There are legends that say the balance can be shifted by the creation or suppression of new fountains, but those are, of course, only legends. Not to mention the results would be destructive.”

“Okay. So let’s say somebody, oh, I dunno, made a new fountain. What’d happen then?”

“Imbalance, and eventually the apocalypse.”

“But it would pump a whole lotta Darkness in between the worlds, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, yes. I should say so.”

“Huh.” Myst already knew how this could work to her advantage. “So what’s the big legend?”

“Why, the legend of Delta Rune! The fountains’ fates can be controlled by one human, one monster, and a prince from the Dark!”

“I see. And there are…a lot of princes around here?”

“Why, my own lovely son, of course, who is a miniature version of my perfection. The Prince of Diamonds, who is very meek. The Prince of Clubs, who is afraid of most things. And then the little Prince of Spades, who is…a bit of a handful.”

“Riiiiight. Okay. Good to know. Well, let’s just hope nobody decides to rally up a team of monsters and princes to start opening fountains all over.”

“That is a very handsome hope!”

Back to the ballroom they went, and Myst decided she owed the King of Hearts a dance. He kept his hands exactly where they should be. All the while, she kept an eye out for the Prince of Spades.
He was a teenager then, almost an adult. Thickset, with a head shaped like a spade itself, all dressed in blue. He had stuffed hors d’oeuvres into Sans’ eye sockets, then poured a bunch of ketchup onto the skeletal Darkner to make it look like he was bleeding to death.

Myst was spun into the hands of another dancer. Not a king this time, but a cat, and a rather handsome one at that, with dark, fluffy fur and shining eyes. “Are you a guest from above?” he asked.

“Depends on who you’re asking,” Myst replied. “You’re one of the head honchos down here?”


“Stop, stop! Leave me be!”

The high-pitched cry came from across the room. Myst and the cat both turned immediately to see the Prince of Spades with a small jester, using the entertainer’s belled hat to tie his hands behind his back so he couldn’t get free once stuffed under the buffet table.

“No!” the magician cried, breaking into a run. Myst trotted over as well, though hardly in defense of the jester.

She left the magician to tend to the little jester as she cornered the prince. “You like pickin’ on people who aren’t your own size, I see,” she observed.

“Does it matter to you?” the prince asked indignantly.

“I’d say it does.” Myst leaned in close. “I might know some people who are lookin’ for a guy like that. A guy not afraid to get his hands dirty.”

“Introduce me to them at once! I am not appreciated here at all! They say I am too violent!”

“We’ll get there,” Myst promised. “I just gotta figure out the other piece of the puzzle first. Nice meetin’ ya, kid.”

“My name is Ace.”

“On the flipside, Ace.”

Myst now had to give this all a big think. To do that, she would need solitude. She strode toward the castle’s exit, beginning to ponder.

“Wait, wait! Strange yet beautiful visitor!”

The small jester was dancing toward her. “You helped to save me,” he giggled with glee, hopping from one foot to the other. “Saving is important, after all!”

“I’m not here to play hero,” Myst snorted.

“Oh, but you are here to save, aren’t you?” the jester posed. “You can’t progress in the game unless you save!”

“Thaaaat’s nice.”

With that, she left.
“I wonder if she will figure out how this game is truly played,” the jester pondered.

In a forest of scarlet trees, Myst sat down and continued to ponder.

A human, a monster, and a prince from the Dark. Well, Ace seemed to fill that last requirement, and she was definitely the first. But where was she to get a monster?

This had to be what the Master had been referring to by stacking the deck in favor of Darkness. More fountains had to be opened. That way, the Darkness would be well-fed, and even the implosion of this world could spread more of it throughout the grand cosmic order.

The problem was that prophecy. All of the monsters Myst knew were sealed up inside the mountain in her hometown. First of all, she wasn’t even certain of how to get back to the town. Second, even if she could, the problem of getting a monster out of the mountain was separate entirely. They couldn’t cross the Barrier around the mountain, and neither could she, if she entered.

In fact, the only monster she’d ever seen in her life (if Sans wasn’t one, which she severely doubted, but he was going to be no help and she knew it) was the tiny one who’d attempted to escape with his little human corpse in tow on her grocery day.

Grocery day…

That was twenty years ago, and yet the image still stood out clearly in her mind. Mostly that of the trumpet. It had also been the source of a time anomaly. She had died, then been transported back far enough to avoid that fate, and never figured out how or why. It was almost like being reverted to a save state in a video game.

Though that combination of words might just have been on her mind because of the jester’s turn of phrase.

She’d played games before, in a few of her past lives. She knew how it worked. And she began to wonder. What if it was like a save state? What if she was able to retrieve lost years by reverting to that very trumpet?

It was worth a try. The worst she could do was look foolish, and there was nobody watching.

She shut her eyes, focusing on the dark. The image of the trumpet filled her mind, its brass sparkling in the light.

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with determination. To do what, exactly? Play the trumpet? No, she wanted –

Wait, she knew what she wanted.

This was twenty years ago. Grocery day.

Myst could hardly believe it, at first. She rushed to the mirror, laughing at how her face was tighter, more free of laugh lines, her hair unblemished by gray streaks. She’d managed to load a save state in real life, and travel back in time to relive two whole decades.

That meant her only chance was about to pass by soon.
She bolted out the door, racing to get to the mountainside before the angry mob could throng.

He came trailing buttercup petals from his feet. He was dressed in a striped shirt, as was the human child in his arms. It was so easy to see, when the context was removed, that he wasn’t carrying a kill. He was bearing the corpse of someone he’d lost and mourned, a brunette child his age. Perhaps a playmate.

The little white-furred monster halted when he saw Myst bolting toward him. “Don’t go into town, idiot!” she barked. “Whaddaya think’s gonna happen when they see you carrying a dead human, huh?”

Startled, he dropped the corpse, where it looked to be nothing more than sleeping. “Th-they’re my sibling,” he stammered. “We promised to do this together – “

“Yeah, well, they’re gone now. Got it?”

The monster hung his head. “I figured out that was what they were going for. It was too late, then. We just wanted to cross the barrier.”

“Congratulations. Barrier crossed. Now could you maybe NOT screw that up by dying right away?”

The monster regarded Myst with sad eyes. “Will they really kill me if they see me?”

“They kinda shoved your family into the mountain so they wouldn’t have to look at your face,” Myst reminded him. “So, yeah, odds are high. But lower if you don’t carry a whole corpse into town.”

“What should I do?” the small monster asked with trepidation. “Should I go back inside?”

He wasn’t like Myst’s schoolchildren. He didn’t seem at all ill-behaved, or aggressive, or boisterous. Perhaps she could actually work with this.

“Nah,” she told him with a smile that looked more wicked than she’d intended. “See, I wouldn’t want you to waste all that time and energy. Your little sib there died so you could do this. You really wanna turn your back on ‘em now?”

“No,” the monster child admitted. “But where do I go from here? Chara and I didn’t think this far.”

Chara. The dead one. Myst nodded. “Tell you what. I’ll take you back to my place, make you some chocolate-coconut cake, give you a bed to sleep in for the night, and we’ll talk it over in the morning.”

“My parents always told me not to trust strangers.”

“Then maybe you should’ve thought about that before coming up here to where literally everyone’s a stranger, huh?”

The small monster nodded, puffing up his chest. “Let’s go. But I like butterscotch pie better than – “

“You’re getting chocolate-coconut cake. End of story.”

Myst kept to the alleys, her new protégé protected from the eyes of humans, until they
reached her home. Once the pair was inside, she finally asked, “What’s your name, kid?”

“Asriel. Asriel Dreemurr.”


“It’s nice to meet you to.”

Myst chuckled. “Kid, you don’t have to be so formal! Let your hair down a little! Or, y’know, whatever you goat people do with your fur. I dunno. Just kick back and relax! I’m not gonna let anything bad happen to you here.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” Myst said sincerely. “Twenty years if I have to.”

For twenty years, Myst acted the role of mother, mentor, Master. Asriel grew up beneath her roof, maturing into a lanky monster who preferred to wear purple tees over his jeans. He practiced magic, displaying abilities Myst hadn’t thought possible.

Every year, on the day Asriel had told Myst was his birthday, she made him a cake (not a pie) and considered passing the Keyblade to him. Something always held her back. She was very fond of him, but when she was alone in her chambers, with No Name drawn, the Master’s eye seemed to warn her “no.” As if it could see something about Asriel that Myst was missing.

She decided the test would be the prophecy.

She’d done her best to relive those twenty years as she’d done the first time, only with a child in tow. She became employed at the school. Perfect. The gateway was open.

She sat Asriel down as the fateful date approached. “Azzy,” she said, “I gotta tell you somethin’. And you ain’t gonna believe it.”

“Try me,” Asriel challenged with a smirk.

“This ain’t the only world there is,” Myst told him.

“I always hoped there was more,” Asriel admitted. “I felt like I had done everything you could do in the mountain.”

“What if I told you there was a world we could rule together? Well, I’m thinkin’ I’d put you more in the front and center. I’d be more of the operator from the shadows.”

An Asriel who had never met Myst might balk, might think it morally unsound. Or might have been thrust into circumstances that would have changed his outlook on life entirely. This Asriel, however, lit up at the thought. “Being king does sound a lot better than being a prince.”

“How about ‘knight’? I’ll be queen, and you’ll be my knight.”

“King.”

“KNIGHT.”

“Fine,” Asriel relented. “So what’s the plan?”
“See, I was originally thinking stealth,” Myst admitted. “Then I learned what you can really do when you get fired up, and I figure we might as well go for broke. The endgame goal is to open up as many Fountains of Darkness as we can. That’ll make sense when you get there. The first thing, though, is to get rid of those stinkin’ cards. All except our Ace.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’m in.”

This time, when Myst entered the ball, she was dressed in a red formal dress adorned with sequins, No Name in hand. Asriel entered alongside her, purple robes flowing.

A Thundaga pierced the air overhead. Once the attention of all was caught, Asriel stepped forth; Myst stepped back.

“This is my world now!” Asriel proclaimed. “You all answer to your Knight!”

The King of Clubs stepped forth, a heavy club (of course) materializing in his hands. “Or else what?”

Asriel lifted his arms to the sky, twirling.

Outside, the sky was filled with light for the first time: a rainbow starfall, descending upon the castle.

The card kings were locked up. Only prince Ace, who was now the new King of Spades, was spared – as were select members of his court. The cat-mage, the jester, and a rather gooey and lanky lackey had bent the knee to Asriel in desperation, and Myst had ruled they could stick around.

“Might be some fun,” she said with a shrug.

They commandeered the card castle together. Ace ordered his subjects to tend to his every whim, no matter how disgusting – the cat-mage clipped his toenails, the jester cleaned his drains, and the gooey man practiced making roux so he could eventually become a castle chef. (He never learned anything besides the roux, which had too many worms in it for the King’s liking.)

Asriel had wanted to go for the gold right away, but Myst had warned him to take it slow. “We’re playing the long game, remember? We gotta make it look legit.”

So they established a totalitarianism. Ace grew taller, rounder, wore royal robes over the mouth that had sprouted in his abdomen. Asriel added neon-rainbow armor to his own garb. Myst strutted about in voluminous red, glittering ballgowns, her hair pinned into curls. The cat-mage, Seam, was dedicated to enforcing their orders. The jester, Jevil, was assigned entertainment and propaganda. The gooey man, Rouxls, they couldn’t really figure out what to do with, so they assigned him to make puzzles to stymie people from getting too close to the castle (even though everyone knew Rouxls was no good at thinking things through).

“Is it time?” Asriel asked one day.

“Can you be patient for two seconds?” Myst retorted.

“Fine.”

After exactly two seconds, Myst smirked. “Okay. Let’s do it.”
They rounded up Ace, and the three of them proceeded to the yard where the second fountain was to be opened.

Only to find the way barred.

“hey,” Sans greeted. “you better not be doing what i think you’re doing.”

“What does it matter if we are?” Myst posed. “It’s not like you can stop us.”

“look, normally, i wouldn’t even care. except if you open up a new dark fountain, well, that’s gonna make problems for everybody.”

“Oh, noooo!” Myst mocked. “Not PROBLEMS! Anything but PROBLEMS! Look, Skelebone, I know all about the problems. I am causing problems on purpose. Get it? Now, I’m the Queen. Asriel is your Knight. Ace is your King. You’re just a hot dog seller.”

“I thought he was a newspaper deliveryman,” Asriel said in confusion.

“He isn’t a janitor?” Ace chimed in.

“I’m just sick of you waltzing around here, falling asleep on stuff and not making sense,” Myst sighed. “So just go take a nap and forget about it.”

“can’t really do that,” Sans informed her. “see, i normally wouldn’t. things have a way of sorting themselves out. but this is gonna be bad for more worlds than just this one. you know that. you’re gonna try and do it anyway. i don’t think anybody else is gonna be able to cut it, so i’m gonna stop you right here.”

“You?” Myst was chuckling. “Stop ME? What, are you going to – “

She was rammed from below by a wall of bones, catapulted into the air. Bones flew at her from all angles; she teleported across the hall. Great skull-shaped blasters descended, blasting from every direction and forcing her to blink in and out of view.

“do that?” Sans replied. “yeah.”

Myst landed hard on the floor, No Name shimmering to hand. “GET HIM!” she yelled at Ace and Asriel.

Rainbow stars showered from above as Asriel swung a pair of thick blades wildly. A tongue with a sharp spade-shaped tip protruded from Ace’s second jaws, and he swung it like a chained weapon, flinging the blade at Sans. Meanwhile, Myst shifted No Name into the form it preferred on this world – a hand-mounted blaster that filled up with purple energy in order to unleash multiple projectiles.

“WHOA!” Asriel cried. “You never told me your sword could do that?”

“It’s my Chaos Buster!” Myst snapped back. “You want one? Go find your own!”

Queen, King, and Knight scattered, raining their attacks on Sans – who was hardly bothered. He simply never seemed to be where any of them struck, as though he himself were teleporting the way Myst did.

“the reports mentioned there was already one pretty big anomaly,” he stated. “and also one smaller one, but we let that one go. a lot of stuff already happened that shouldn’t have. and that’s
“You weren’t supposed to know about that!” Myst growled, shooting a barrage from the Chaos Buster as she perched on the ceiling.

“this is the last straw,” Sans decided. “i was willing to let a lot of it go, but not if you’re gonna start opening fountains again. i’m the one who gets involved when there’s no hope left, and i think we passed that point a long time ago. not that i won’t be kinda satisfied when you get what you deserve and burn in hell.”

The hallway filled with sharpened bones, flying like arrows. Ace, Asriel, and Myst hustled to evade them, not always successful. Asriel went down with one embedded in his thigh. Ace’s second jaws swallowed one, and he appeared to be choking for a moment.

“THAT’S IT!” Myst zapped herself right up to Sans.

And he zapped across the room. So he was teleporting.

She gave chase, swinging the Chaos Buster as she followed him. Now he was on the ceiling, and so was she. Now he was on one wall, and she was on the opposite, hoping to snipe him off guard. Now she was hurtling toward him in midair, and he had almost seemed to pass right through her to the other side, letting her slam into a solid wall of bone.

“Clever little sneak!” Myst teased. “Now we’re talking!”

“having a bad time yet?” Sans taunted.

“Actually, the party’s just starting,” Myst replied as a bone projectile took out her coiffure, spilling her blue-gray locks. “Let’s see how you dance.”

“never liked dancing. too much effort.”

And in fact, when she rained a hell of bullets upon him from above, he simply managed to not be there when they descended.

“Oh, yeah?” Myst snarled, hurling herself toward Sans yet again. “You REALLY shouldn’t have betr – “

And the next spear of bone pierced right through her heart.

“Really, your majesty? Is that how you wish to end the game? Get up.”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with determination. To do what, exactly?

Kill Sans. That was what.

Except she was now twenty whole years behind schedule.

She collapsed into a kitchen chair. What could she do now? Just redo twenty more years of her life?

Yes. That was exactly what she was going to do. And this time, she wouldn’t be stopped.
She bolted out the door to retrieve Asriel.

Two decades later, Myst, Asriel, and Ace strutted down the hall to the courtyard to find Sans blocking their path.

“again?” he asked. “seriously? thought you’d get the message after i broke your heart."

“What is he talking about?” Asriel asked in confusion.


Without waiting for Sans to initiate, she launched at him, swinging No Name.

This time, she kept it as a Keyblade, a more familiar form. Each time she swung, Sans was just a hair to the left or right of where the blade came to rest. “WILL YOU HOLD STILL?” Myst growled.

“no thanks,” Sans replied.

Stars fell. A spade swung. Bones protruded dangerously from every surface.

Then, without warning, Myst cried out, “NEW BACKDROP!”

They were in the more open courtyard, all four of them. Myst sent her Keyblade hurtling toward Sans from behind.

And a spear of bone went through her head.

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with determination to crush that skeleton to dust and marrow.

Twenty years later, she suggested taking an alternate route to the courtyard, but he was waiting there.

“still haven’t learned your lesson, huh?” he taunted. “hopefully the third time’s the charm.”

“What is he talking about?” Asriel asked.

“Don’t…just don’t.” Myst rubbed at her temples. “Let’s just get this over with.”

The battle began.

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with revulsion. She was so sick of that trumpet.

“see the look on your face? that’s the look of someone who’s died four times and still hasn’t learned anything.”
“Yeah, well, it’ll take a few more than that.”

“What is he talking ab – “

“Shut UP, Asriel!”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. Sans was a dead skeleton walking.

“now, that’s more like the look of someone who’s died seven times.”

“Joke’s on you. I get twenty extra birthdays every time we dance this dance.”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a fluttery feeling in her stomach. It was replaced immediately by unbridled rage.

“fifteen times and you’re still going? you haven’t gotten sick of this yet?”

“I’ve waited a lot longer than three centuries for this, Skelebone. I could do this my whole life.”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass compelled Myst to hurl the instrument against the wall.

“that’s the look of someone who’s died thirty-seven times and still doesn’t get it. it’s kinda funny.”

“WILL YOU JUST DIE?”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass made Myst realize how Airy must have felt doing this to ten thousand Luxendarcs.

“listen. we’re going on fifty now. you’ve wasted way more time on this than you need to. you’re tired. i’m tired. well, i’m always tired. why don’t we just call the whole thing off?”

“See, what you’re not getting is that once I’ve tried this fifty times, I’m not gonna let that be for nothing.”

“What is he talk – “

“SHUT UP, ASRIEL.”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst the impression that maybe, this time, she had to think up a new strategy.

She’d done it all over again. Picked up Asriel and raised him like her own. Simultaneously,
she was so, so fond of him and so, so tired of him.

Not much could be done in the interim. She had to wait for him to reach maturity and for the portal to the Dark World to open. Then they took over and sat Ace on the throne. That didn’t need to change. There was nothing wrong with that side of the plan.

It was while they were restructuring the Spade kingdom that Myst knew she had to make her move. She needed a new trump card. Something that would shatter every bone in Sans’ body.

“Yo, kitty cat!” she called out as she strolled into Seam’s magical laboratory. “Need your help, and need it bad.”

“How may I be of assistance?” Seam asked, his tone betraying that he didn’t totally want to be of assistance.

“Listen.” Myst sighed. “I need some kinda instant death spell that can take out a teleporting target who won’t stand STILL.”

“I have many tricks and trinkets that can bring about death. Yet I get the sense that your problem requires a little more than a poison or a bomb.”

“I basically need to kill the impossible,” Myst demanded. “So, you gonna prove yourself as an actual magician or do I have to fire you for somebody who actually knows what they’re doing?”

Seam chuckled. “I was never a fighter or a killer, you know. You’ll want to ask Jevil.”

Myst did a double take. “…Jevil? The jester.”

“The very same. He knows quite a few things, you know.”

“The jester is gonna help me kill this impossible guy.”

“When the problem seems impossible,” Seam replied, “it seems to me the only sense to be made is in an impossible solution.”

Myst sighed. “Fine. I’ll go see what Sir Laughsalot has to say on the subject.”

Seam sighed as she left. “And, as usual, I will turn a blind eye.”

She found Jevil juggling swords in the throne room. Well, at least he knew how to handle a weapon with finesse.

“Sir Laughsalot!” Myst snapped. “Got a question for ya. Kitty-cat says you’re secretly a master assassin. Yes or no?”

Jevil faced Myst, then doubled over in a fit of laughter as his swords hit the ground. “Finally!” he cackled. “She sees fit to ask me, ask me, ask me! I knew she couldn’t do it on her own. Our queen is wonderful, but so short-sighted – “

“It’s not like that!” Myst groaned.

“Then what is it like, like?”

“More like…so. Okay. Think about this whole thing, this world, all the worlds in fact, like a big game of chess. You have the light side and the dark side moving toward each other, right?”
The chess metaphor was common among Keybearers. All apprentices learned the game. It was to train them to think about things in a complex manner rather than just swinging away.

“So say we’re the dark side,” Myst went on. “I’m the queen. The most powerful piece. Azzy’s the knight, meaning he packs a punch and comes when you don’t expect him, but he can’t do anything straightforward. And then you have Ace, the king, who you’d think is the most powerful piece on the board but is more like a glass cannon. Now, can a game of chess get won with just three pieces?”

“No, no, no! Silly that would be!”

“EXACTLY. We need bishops. Rooks. Pawns. Whatever you wanna call yourself. Can one of those win the game on its own?”

“Even sillier would THAT be!”

“Now you’re getting it.” Myst smirked. “It’s all just a game of chess, and we’re headed for a checkmate, one way or another. Play the game, and you get to win.”

“Yes, yes!” Jevil clapped, bouncing up and down. “I want to play, play, play!”

“Here’s what I need you to do. You come to the main courtyard entry hall tomorrow at noon sharp. Then we go up against the other side.”

“What a wonderful game!” Jevil cried, bouncing up and down. “A game of chaos, chaos!”

“…Yeah,” Myst said tentatively. “If you say so. You do you.”

She turned to leave, but was almost out the door when she heard Jevil say the words:

“May your heart be your guiding key, key!”

Immediately, Myst had blinked back in, pinning Jevil up against the wall. “WHAT did you just say?”

“Words I heard a long time ago, from a strange, strange person!” Jevil chuckled.

“What kind of person? WHO?”

“Strange!”

Myst sighed. “We’ll talk about this AFTER tomorrow.” She dropped him, then pointed at him as she exited. “But we ARE talking about this!”

“Why is he here?” Asriel asked.

“Foolish jester!” Ace balked. “We do not need to be entertained during the opening of the fountain!”

“Just trust me on this one, guys,” Myst sighed.

“What fun!” Jevil cried as he bounced about. “Play, play, the great game of chess!”

“…Myst, are you okay?” Asriel inquired.
Sans barred their way yet again. “oh, hey. was wondering when you guys would – huh. that’s new. you usually don’t bring him. that’s fine. i can work with this.”

Myst glared directly into Sans’ eye sockets. Then, in a low growl, she proclaimed, “New backdrop.”

All of a sudden, the quintet was transported into a purple-and-blue field that revolved like a carousel.


“GET HIM!” Myst cried, No Name blazing into hand as she charged Sans.

This time, she focused on blocking his projectiles first and foremost. No Name stayed a key for that; the Chaos Buster would do no good in a defense situation. Ace threw his chain as per usual, but missed by a wide margin. Asriel’s starfall didn’t even hit close.

The nice thing about the world revolving was that it threw Sans off, too.

His spears and arrows missed, sticking everywhere but into his intended targets. His teleportation was also shoddy; he found himself right in the path of Asriel’s swords before hastily redirecting.

And that was just before Jevil got involved.

“CHAOS, CHAOS!” Jevil cried, his own projectiles unaffected by the trajectory. He seemed to be used to this entirely. Spades, diamonds, hearts, and clubs bounced through the air, exploding into smaller projectiles that ricocheted toward Sans.

“those are some nifty tricks,” Sans complimented. “where’d you get this guy, anyway?”

“You would know,” Myst growled, “seeing as you’ve apparently seen me enlist him FIFTY TIMES!”

The battle continued to rage, but now it seemed more like a stalemate. Nobody had landed a hit on anybody, except for when Ace had accidentally broadsided Asriel with the flat of his spade. (Or maybe that was on purpose, given that it came from Ace.) “this is fun and all,” Sans yawned, “but we gotta wrap this up sometime.”

“For the record, it was your idea,” Myst said with a smirk.

“yeah,” Sans affirmed. “my idea to just blast you all and be done for the day.”

The skull-blasters ringed the carousel, aiming at Myst, Asriel, Ace, and Jevil.

“see you in twenty years, i guess,” Sans said with a shrug. “hopefully not.”

“You’re forgetting one thing,” Myst set up.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes, yes!” Jevil cried, bouncing so fervently that he seemed to be in three places at once. “You’re forgetting that I CAN DO ANYTHING!”
He exploded into a cluster of wickedly-sharp scythes.

One scythe for each blaster; every skull was carved in two, clattering to the floor useless. The largest, sharpest scythe of all spun round and round through the air; Myst teleported out of its range so it could hit what was behind her.

It was just enough off-center; Jevil had anticipated Sans’ erratic movements. Sans had obviously attempted to evade again, but Jevil was ready for him, and with a series of crackles, the scythe plunged right into Sans’ chest.

Red spurted. The skeleton collapsed.

He craned his cracked skull to look up at Myst. “guess you win this one,” he relented. “who knows? maybe i’m just someone else’s problem now. someone else’s time anomaly. also, don’t worry. it’s ketchup.”

And then he crumbled to dust and blew away.

The courtyard returned to normal. Jevil bounced up and down in place, repeating, “CHAOS! CHAOS! CHAOS!”

“I really have no idea what just happened,” Asriel sighed.

“We won,” Myst told him. “Took us long enough.”

“What? That was a half hour, tops – “

“Let’s just finish it.”

In the yard, Asriel, Ace, and Myst positioned themselves in an equilateral triangle around the area they’d planned for the fount. They put out their hands to each other, palms facing. A deep dark crackled into place at the triangle’s center.

Then an amazing geyser of Darkness erupted, bursting into the sky above.

“One down,” Myst remarked.

“How many more to go?” Asriel asked,

“As many as it takes,” Myst told him.

As Myst plotted the location of the next fountain, she realized that Jevil was slowly becoming a problem.

It was bad enough when he’d merely been harassing the other members of the court, such as following Rouxls around with some jabber about how all the world was a great puzzle. However, when he murdered several of the lower-echelon footmen, Myst ordered him locked up.

She approached his subterreanean cell, glowering at him through the bars. “What’s your actual problem?” she snapped.

“At last, I got your attention!” Jevil chuckled. “You said we would talk, talk! But we never did.”

Myst sighed. “So start talking.”
“Why did you seal yourself away?”


“No, no!” Jevil insisted. “No matter where I am, free, free, free I be! But you are a prisoner of your own destiny! All the worlds to explore, and no advantage taken! How long has it been since you set out to do what you were supposed to do? Hmm? No, nothing but chaos, chaos!”

“…You know something,” Myst realized. “Spit it out, pal. Is it about the Keyblade War? About Daybreak Town?”

“The Key is what you used to seal yourself and everyone else away, away!” Jevil proclaimed. “It locked up all your doors! Now you have nowhere to go, go!”

“I don’t think you get it,” Myst told him. “I’ve been going everywhere I possibly can go. I’ve seen things you can’t imagine.”

“But have you seen things you can’t imagine?”

“Wha – that’s literally impossible!”

“Not for you. You have the Key!”

“Can you just explain what this is about?” Myst growled.

“Order is good,” Jevil told him. “Doing what you’re told is good. But you won’t become who you are unless you let yourself be free as me! After all, did you feel more at home with Chaos, or with Cosmos?”

“You really aren’t gonna tell me exactly how you know all this stuff about my life, are you?”

“It’s easy to see, see!”

Myst sighed. “I’ll figure this out later. I’ve had about enough of you for one day. Maybe one lifetime.”

She stormed back upstairs, making each step echo with the hard slam of her foot.

“One day, you will see, see,” Jevil chuckled. “When your prison is all the worlds, and I am free in my prison.”

Seam came stumbling into Myst’s audience chamber with one eye missing, now a fount of blood.

“What happened?” Myst cried as she stood up.

“When you turn a blind eye…” Seam panted, pressing his hands to the socket. “The world decides you no longer need it anyway.”

“Will somebody make sense around here?”

“The knight,” Seam explained. “He has lost his mind. He is coming for you next.”

“Wha –”
The doors were broken down. Seam scurried to hide away. Asriel soared in, batlike wings extended from his back and swords raised high.

Myst countered with No Name, staving back his blades. “Hey, CUT IT OUT!” she yelled. “This mutiny came outta nowhere?”

“Did it?” Asriel growled. “DID IT?”

It was then that she noticed his eyes were bright red. They had never been red before.

“Holy…” Myst’s own eyes widened. “You’re not Azzy.”

“No DUH!”

Myst was flung aside, hitting the ground hard. She refused to go out without a fight, pulling the Chaos Buster to hand. “What’s with the sudden homicidal mania?”

“More like genocidal,” the person who wasn’t Asriel responded. “For twenty years, I’ve been sitting here, trying to figure out if the world was even worth anything after how it treated me. I kept hoping to see what was worth living about it. But all you and Asriel and the other idiots ever showed me was DEATH AND DARKNESS!”

Myst dodged another heavy slam of both swords into the ground.

“You taught me the real world order!” the person who wasn’t Asriel cried. “It’s kill or be killed! Well, I got done with Asriel! It’s not like he did any good to begin with. He broke us out of the mountain just to get us stuck down HERE?”

Myst realized it, then. “You’re Chara, aren’t you?” she cried as she let off a barrage of chaos bullets.

“Bingo.” Chara batted every projectile aside with their swords. Asriel’s swords in their hands. Asriel’s hands controlled by their mind. “I’ve always been here, you know. Our souls fused when you let us walk out of the mountain together.”

Myst blinked out of the way of three more swipes of the swords. “You weren’t just raising my brother!” Chara screamed. “You were raising me, too! But did you care? No! You just wanted your precious Knight so you could build your Fountains! I’ve been trying to tell him you don’t love him, but HE WON’T LISTEN!”

“Who says I don’t love him?”

“IF YOU LOVED HIM, YOU WOULD’VE MADE HIM A PIE! NOT A CAKE!”

It was a petty statement, but Myst understood the implications. She put herself on the ceiling for a temporary sanctuary. “So, what,” she groaned, “you’ve taken over permanently?”

“He’s not in charge anymore.” Chara growled. “He never will be. It’s not my turn. And you’re not gonna be in charge either.”

The swords embedded themselves into the roof as Myst backflipped to stand on the cushion of her throne. “I’ll just have to fix that little problem on the next go.”

“Next go?” Chara repeated. “NEXT GO?”

The throne was cleaved in half, Myst darting around the room.
“I’ll always be here,” Chara growled. “No matter how many times you find Asriel coming out of the mountain, I’ll be with him. The only thing that could ever change that, EVER, is if you start treating us better.”

“Define ‘better.’” Myst ducked a deadly swing. “You just want more attention, or…?”

“Show me there’s more to the world than death and destruction, chaos and Darkness,” Chara seethed. “Show me there are reasons WORTH being a good person. Give me one good reason I SHOULDN’T be this way!”

Myst realized, then, that this was an even more futile battle than Sans. She let herself fall still, the Chaos Buster twinkling out of view.

“I can’t,” she said solemnly.

Chara paused, swords drawn back. “Why not?”

“Because there aren’t any.”

The swords pierced Myst through.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. But I suppose I can say I’m sorry. Get up.”

The way the sun reflected off the trumpet’s brass gave Myst a sinking feeling in her stomach. The instrument seemed to sparkle almost unnaturally. The very sight of it filled Myst with determination.

No matter what she did, Asriel would corrupt to Chara. The only option was to be a hero, to be a good person, to model a good person for Chara to be. But that wasn’t possible anymore. Myst’s entire existence, all her lives beforehand, had relied on her turning a blind eye. Had relied on her sacrificing the senseless in the name of destiny. And had only become truly fun when she let go of her inhibitions and let herself be the villain of the story.

Even if she gave up on the Master’s instructions, she would always need school supplies to steal and more in order to have any meaning to her life. And that would bring out Chara.

So she began her final quest, calling up No Name and activating the Chaos Buster.

She barreled toward the mountainside, breath hitching. She had to get there first. After all, in one timeline, the Darkness had been unleashed. That should be enough. It would linger. It would poison. It would stain. It didn’t matter if she didn’t do it again.

Asriel lumbered down the mountain, Chara’s corpse in his arms. The people were thronging to see the spectacle.

Myst pushed to the very front of the crowd. “THAT MONSTER KILLED A CHILD!” she screeched. “KILL HIM!”

And she put a bullet right through Asriel’s head.
Izuru Kamukura

Chapter Notes

While this was mostly written to be canon-compliant with its world’s source, there will be one or two things that don’t make sense, largely the meshing of something that shouldn’t be here. Use your own imagination to decide why these characters appear. This chapter will also feature a pair of Freeman’s fabulous OCs! Finally, this chapter features some heavy canon-typical violence/gore, so stay safe!

He wasn’t the Izuru Kamukura you’re probably thinking of. He was the one that one was named after. The one who came first.

Another thing: he had white hair from the very start, as a youth. His peers always joked about him being an “old man.” If only they knew.

It had been another few turns since Myst, and Izuru was now focused on finding his apprentice. One who wouldn’t have another evil soul inside of them. (He would eventually be dismayed to learn how often that actually happens.) He decided he was going to dedicate this entire lifetime to that apprentice. No distractions this time.

He got the idea while in high school. By this time, he’d lived so much that pretty much everything was old hat. Math tests, book reports, you name it: solid As. His classmates considered him some sort of savant, and when the novelty of “old man” wore off, they began calling him “the ultimate” for his ability to strangely be so much better than everyone else at everything.

This inspired in him one of his stranger thoughts. But at this point, what was normal anymore? Traditional methods of apprentice-seeking weren’t working in the slightest.

What if, he wondered, he could gather prospective candidates all in one place to sift through? If he could find other students considered “ultimate,” educate them under his supervision, and weed out the incompetent until he had a handful of worthy Keybearers?

He drew up plans while still in his own schooling. A campus for youth who were only the very best at what they did. They would be scouted, not taken through application. No, perhaps there could be a program for application to boost funding, but these wouldn’t be Keybearer material. No, that was only the ultimates. Ultimate what? It didn’t matter. Izuru wanted a range to choose from. Fighters, intellectuals, artists.

In his adulthood, he put out the proposition. People bought that he knew what he was talking about; Myst had been the start of a lot of dabbling in the educational field, so he was aware of all the proper jargon. Only one question stood in his way: why gather ultimates?

He wasn’t about to tell this backwater world about Keyblades. The people here didn’t even think magic was real. It was somehow even more boring than Myst’s realm. But he could spin the language a little. Say he was gathering Japan’s best and brightest to protect this world’s Light. No, they wouldn’t understand “Light.” But maybe they would if he renamed it “hope.” Yes, he was building an elite force to guard hope!
It sold. Furthermore, the proposed campus was named “Hope’s Peak Academy.” Izuru spent a lot of time laughing behind closed doors. So the people of this world would just fall for it if told that people with “talent” were responsible for their future. Nothing to do with will or spirit. Or even destiny. No, they would only feel safe if the people who were ultimately superior were culled out and elevated. That was a recipe for a mess. Izuru knew he would need to pick his apprentice soon, because with a concept like that in the works, he was running on borrowed time until the “untalented” realized the inherent unfairness of the system and rose up in protest. Perhaps causing a citywide, countrywide calamity.

Emet-Selch would have been proud.

Izuru was actually rather amazed that he still remembered that person after all these years. Emet-Selch might have been the best friend he’d ever had. The best friend who hadn’t turned on him, anyway. The Foretellers had turned on him. Airy had been a good friend to turn Lustre around in her time of need, but not best-buddy material. Asriel was an odd case when it came to classifying him as a betrayal. Ace and Jevil were only ever just pains in the keister.

In any case, Hope’s Peak was erected, standing tall above the skyline. You couldn’t walk into town and not notice it. Its crest was that of a lightning bolt crossed with a paintbrush. Izuru explained it as the fire of passion for talent crossed with its tool.

Its original draft had been a Thundaga spell crossed with a Keyblade before he realized that would give too much away.

As the youngest high school headmaster in Japanese history, Izuru was installed in the office of the elegant building, where he dispatched legions of scouts to find him his ultimates. Surely, in no time, he would have a sufficient pool.

Maybe it was just because having eternity to live made you picky, but after decades, Izuru still hadn’t found a suitable candidate. Not even one.

The other possibility was that despite all of the students in his care being talented, they were also horribly flawed.

For instance, the pair sitting in front of him in his office. A raven-haired boy with red eyes, grinning smugly at Izuru. A meek girl with short chestnut-colored hair sitting beside him, refusing to meet Izuru’s gaze.

Izuru sighed, then leaned forward on his desk, clasping his hands. “All right, fess up. I know you two did it.”

“Who, me?” Shou Shigeo laughed. “I would never hurt a fly, let alone steal classified Hope’s Peak documents from an authorized-personnel-only zone!” His overconfident act betrayed how much he knew Izuru knew he was lying.

“Nice try, Ultimate Burglar,” Izuru groaned. Really, he should’ve put a few limitations on what talents could be accepted, such as “Burglar.” Then again, with the luck he’d had so far, he couldn’t afford to narrow the cast of the net.

Luck. Now, there was an idea. Maybe he should develop a system to try and pick up kids who were just really lucky in life where talent failed them. That would give him a few extra candidates, anyway.

Back to the matter at hand. “You picked my lock,” Izuru laid out. “You went through all
my stuff. You took the midterm answers, and you sold them to anyone with enough cash. And then, to add insult to injury, you spilled coffee on my datebook.”

“Actually, that last part was an accident,” Shou laughed. “I think of it as a bonus.”

“Got anything to say for yourself, klepto?”

“Yeah,” Shou replied. “You have got to be the most unprofessional guy in the history of teaching high schools. ‘Klepto’? Really? Oh, but if you’re waiting on me to say I regret anything, I don’t.”

“Excuse me.” The girl’s quivering voice piped up. “Why am I here?”

Izuru sighed as he turned in her direction. “Because I know you helped him take the answers.”

“But…I didn’t…” Kamiko Haruki sputtered.

“Let’s go over the facts again,” Izuru told her. “First of all, going through the security footage, you were the second person to pass my office after sticky-fingers here. Now, that on its own could be innocent enough, except that thanks to having all the answers, Shigeo scored the highest out of anyone on the midterm. You scored second highest. And everyone who I have record of buying the answers came in right after you. And finally, you’re just the second most suspicious person to me. You give me these sidekick-accomplice vibes.”

“I can explain that,” Kamiko muttered. “It’s…because of my talent.”

“What? Ultimate Evil Sidekick?”

“No…more like…Ultimate Second Banana.”

“What now?”

“I’m the second best at everything.”

It took Izuru a moment to digest that. Then he let out a loud, bellowing laugh.

“It’s true!” Kamiko argued.


“Is this your way of calling me chickenshit?” Shou retorted.

“It is now,” Izuru told him. “Now get out of here before I get inspired to think of something worse.”

As the pair headed out of the office, Izuru could hear Shou’s fading voice pointing out, “Y’know, we can’t have detention in the Greenhouse if there IS no Greenhouse…”

“OH, NO, NOT AGAIN!” Kamiko cried. “PLEASE DON’T BUILD A BOMB INSIDE THE SCHOOL!”

Izuru sighed, then got up from his seat to procure a bagel.
Still no luck, and now Izuru really was old enough to justify his white hair. (Physically, as usual.)

Eventually, he decided on two things.

One was that he must die. Being front and center of the action wasn’t doing him favors. Who knew? He might’ve liked that Shigeo kid if he hadn’t been the victim of the crime. He would be far more valuable as a consultant, but he was famed far and wide. His stepping down wouldn’t be taken lightly. He had to build up a whole conspiracy around this. Pretend to die, then let only his most trusted in on the know. Like Kazuo Tengen, who was pretty much overqualified for the seat up next.

The other was that he must not die. Always, his lifetimes would be brought to an abrupt end, and then he was forced to start over on another world. Hope’s Peak was a good system. He just needed to be able to stick around long enough to see the punchline.

There was an old Keybearer trick. One he’d modified in order to keep reincarnating, but the basic version was a lot grittier. You could plant your heart inside somebody else’s body. Cohabitate, or force the original out. Then continue your life with that person’s visage. The method Izuru currently used to reincarnate was less invasive. But desperate times called for desperate measures. If he needed to make a new body for himself, a younger one that would keep him going, then so be it.

As Kazuo ascended, he talked the idea over with him. Then, after Kazuo’s brief stint, Jin Kirigiri took over, and was also informed of Izuru’s falsified death. Izuru and Kazuo remained as consultants to Jin, watching over his flock from the sidelines.

It was rather difficult explaining this to Jin. As it had been to Kazuo. They didn’t know the terminology of hearts. What they did understand was consciousness.

“So you’re proposing we implant your consciousness in another student,” Jin stated.

“Just skim one off the Reserve Course,” Izuru suggested. “Won’t even be missed.”

“This is an outrage!” Kazuo cried. “All this, for what? To propagate hope? Humanity should be left to choose!”

“Sometimes, humanity just flat-out doesn’t get a choice,” Izuru reminded him. Well, maybe not “reminded.” Maybe that only meant anything to the man who’d been Luxu. “Aren’t we stacking the odds by having this school in the first place? This is the logical conclusion. You take a kid, you make him ultra-talented, and then you give him my mind.”

“It’s not scientifically possible,” Jin sighed.

“Sure is,” Izuru reassured him. “I know how. And if you can’t trust me, the ultimate genius, who can you trust about this?”

“If this fails, we may very well end up with a student that has all the talent in the world and NO consciousness, or at least no defining personality traits. No heart.”

“The only problem I hear with that statement is me not being in the picture. C’mon, teach, think about – “

An urgent rap at the door. “Oh, pardon, Headmaster Kirigiri!” a lilting voice called out. “I have a rather urgent matter to discuss with you, as you’ll recall.”
Jin let out a sigh. “I forgot about him.”

“Who is he?” Kazuo asked.

“A father of two of the students we scouted,” Jin groaned. “He insisted on examining the schoolyard to make sure it was up to standard. Apparently, one of his daughters is…high society.”

“Thought we already had a princess,” Izuru muttered.

“This one’s worse than a princess,” Jin informed him. “She’s a supermodel.”

“Ah. That kind.”

“We cannot let him see - !” Kazuo waved frantically to Izuru.

Izuru waved it off. “It’s fine. Let him. He’s not gonna recognize a dead man. Already got my alias.”

“You may enter,” Jin called out.

A lithe man, his hair blond with an almost pink tint to it, swung open the door with an expression of pure disgust. “I would have thought that the headmaster of such a prestigious institution would have opened the door for me,” he sneered. “No matter. This can still be salvaged.”

Izuru really wasn’t sure what about this man held his attention. Maybe it was his avant-garde style of dress, with glittering pink designer boots – the kind that shed little sparkling flakes wherever their owner walked. Or maybe it was his smug air. Whatever the case, this man seemed out of the ordinary.

“Mr. Enoshima,” Jin greeted.

“Please, do call me Masashi,” the man corrected. “Why, I would not even be opposed to ‘Shi,’ if you so desired.”

“Masashi,” Jin amended. “I know you wanted to discuss the appropriateness of this facility for your daughter. I can assure you Hope’s Peak Academy is constructed to the highest standards of any school in Japan.”

“Your institution may outpace Japan’s standard,” Masashi countered, “but that means nothing to an Enoshima standard. Attendance is not compulsory. If I do not find the facility to satisfaction for my daughter, then she will not be attending. It is that simple.”

“I was under the impression you had two daughters,” Jin said as he wrinkled his brow.

Masashi’s brow furrowed as well. “Mukuro is my wife’s daughter. Junko is mine. They may share our blood, but nothing more.”


“Calling it ‘paradise’ would be generous, certainly.” Masashi cocked his head. “Are you to be my tour guide?”

“If you want me to be.” Izuru stepped forward. “Akira Nikuyoku. Right-hand man to the right-hand man.”
He clasped hands with Masashi, shook once. Masashi’s grip was stiff as iron. “A pleasure,” Masashi responded. “Or at least I hope it will turn out to be so. Now, I’ve very little time and a long list of requirements to go over. Shall we begin?”

“Ready to rock and roll.”

Masashi rolled his eyes as he turned to the door. This time, Izuru beat him there, prying it open.

As he showed Masashi around the school, his mind kept wandering back to his little project. The Izuru Kamukura project. Maybe it was overkill to give the kid every talent at once – but how else was Izuru supposed to maintain his skill level? Furthermore, how was he supposed to pass the experiment if it was only about prolonging his own life?

“– you listening to me, Nikuyoku?”

“Huh?” Izuru shook his head. “Oh. Yeah. What you said.”

“I asked you about the locations of fire exits,” Masashi repeated. “I need to know that in the event of a conflagration, Junko could escape safely.”

“While you don’t give a rat’s tail about the other girl.”

“That is my wife’s responsibility. Not mine.”

Izuru guided him to all of the fire exits, continuing to think on what sort of person he would want from the Reserve Course. Why not pick someone already talented? No…he couldn’t remove any candidates from the pool. Strange as it would be to pass No Name to a peer.

“And here’s where we prep the food.” Izuru led Masashi into the kitchen. “Grade-A cuisine. Fine dining. You ain’t gonna find this level in your average high school.”

“I suppose…” Masashi cast his gaze around the room. “You leave the carving knives out in the open? Where students could get hurt?”

“Geez, buddy!” Izuru groaned. “This is a school, not a murder house!” Then, a mutter: “Though a murder house would probably be more interesting.”

“You know…” Masashi turned a suspicious eye upon Izuru. “You remind me of someone. Your demeanor moreso than your face…it is reminiscent of the late Izuru Kamukura.”

“Yeah, I knew the guy,” Izuru replied. “Probably picked up a few bad habits off him. It happens.”

“…So it would seem.” Masashi turned to exit the kitchen. “The specifications have been up to snuff so far. Do not disappoint me now.”

At the end of the tour, Masashi decided Hope’s Peak was just barely good enough for his darling Junko. Izuru, preoccupied with thoughts of his project, bade the man goodbye and turned on a heel, not even noticing his farewell wave.

The other thing about Reserve Course students was that a lot of them had drunk the poison of Hope’s Peak, so to speak. They weren’t angry about being treated as lesser. Not yet. They simply envied the talented. The problem lay in the disparity, not with the staff. Any Reserve student would jump at the chance to host all of Izuru’s talents.
It was down to a matter of picking the most desperate one.

He turned up by the name of “Hajime Hinata.” He wanted to be anything but ordinary. And all of the arguing in the world from Kazuo couldn’t overpower the combined forces of Jin and Izuru.

Hajime, or Izuru 2.0, was taken to the Hope’s Peak basement for the operation, which was slated to take several hours. First, they would have to augment his brain. Implant skills. The transference of Izuru’s heart would have to be the very last piece.

The problem being that Izuru didn’t want to sit around a waiting room for that long.

“I’m out,” he told Jin, turning to leave.

“Out?” Jin did a double take. “We’re doing this FOR YOU!”

“Not out of the project,” Izuru sighed. “I’m goin’ for a walk. Message me when he’s done.”

“You know you can’t be seen – “

“Nobody is gonna believe Izuru Kamukura is back from the dead! They’re not even gonna believe I made it to 90!” It was perhaps the longest time he’d spent in one body, if you didn’t count the time loop Myst had experienced at the bony hands of Sans.

“Well, just be careful. We need you here for the final process. Without you – “

“The kid’ll wake up without any personality except for his super talent. Yeah, yeah, I got you.”

With that, he slipped away.

He started out by sneaking into the dormitory bath house. Stripping away his layers of clothing, he could really see the toll age was taking on him. “How have I not kicked it already?” he muttered.

Then he slid into the water of the men’s side of the pool, letting out a satisfied sigh.

“I don’t seem to recall you being in Class 78.”

Izuru glanced over at the other occupant of the pool, who he hadn’t even noticed until just then. “What, are you the bath police? Gonna say I can’t take a bath here?”

He was a blond boy, long-haired. He’d settled a pair of thin-rimmed spectacles over his eyes in order to more clearly see the intruder. His face was contorted in malcontent. “Actually, I’m higher up than any policeman.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I demand you exit this bathhouse at once.”

“News for ya.” Izuru reached up into the pant pocket that lay on the side of the pool, withdrawing a small white card: a visitor’s pass, of highest importance, that had been printed for “Akira” to be able to walk the grounds that day. “This little card says I go where I want.”

“And I don’t care,” the boy insisted. “I’m ordering you out.”
“O-ho-hooooo! You wanna try and go over the heads of the Hope’s Peak Academy staff? Just you try it, kiddo. You’re a student. What do you really think you can do?”

“I am a student,” the boy confirmed. “I am also a Togami. Byakuya Togami, to be precise.”

Oh. Well, that made more sense as to why he was acting like that.

When Izuru simply said “Guess all that money didn’t pay for common decency,” he realized just how much he’d transformed from Luxu into something more akin to his Master.

“GET. OUT,” the Togami boy growled.

“Fiiiiiiine, Beyblade.” Izuru hoisted himself out of the water. “But not ’cause I wanna, or ’cause you said. ‘Cause I just don’t wanna listen to you talk anymore.”

He dressed, then left the bathhouse.

He’d gotten as far as ten paces before hearing a “HALT!”

Another boy had a hand up toward him, palm out. “Intruder! I demand to see your qualifications!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Izuru put up both hands in return, looking the boy up and down. Neatly trimmed black hair. Crisp white uniform. Everything by the book in terms of dress code. “Slow your roll, Johnny Thunder.”

“My name is Kiyotaka Ishimaru!” the boy corrected. “And I am hall monitor of Hope’s Peak High! It is my duty as hall monitor and as Ultimate Moral Compass to ensure no strangers enter this school with ill intent!” He stood firm, rod-straight. “If you are here to harm my classmates, I am ready to defend them with my life!”

Now Izuru was laughing. “You’re all right, Johnny Thunder. And so am I. Check it out.”

He held out the pass.

Kiyotaka was struck with horror, flinching back as he blanched. “I am so sorry, Mr. Nikuyoku! I did not mean to disturb an honored guest of the staff!” He bowed deeply. “Please forgive me! I have failed as a moral compass!”

“Nah,” Izuru told him. “You’re too good at it, if anything. Lighten up, will ya?”

“Yes, sir! I shall lighten up, exactly as you have commanded!”

Somehow Izuru doubted that was the case. “I’m out.”

“If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask for me!”

“Noted!” Under his breath: “And not gonna do it.”

Upward he went, pacing each floor. On the third, he passed the recreation room, glancing through the window to see a student playing Othello against himself.

Wait.

Izuru opened the door to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. A short boy, probably only class 79, his dark hair flipping out in unruly waves from his head. His uniform
was monochrome, mostly white, with a checkered scarf.

He moved an Othello tile, seated at the left side of the table. “Beat that, Kokichi!” he called triumphantly.

The boy then scooted to the other side of the table, sitting down there. “Brilliant move, Kokichi,” he said in an even tone. “However, I think I can counter it.” He moved the other side’s tile.

Back to the first side. “You ALWAYS do this to me, Kokichi! I’m starting to think you’re cheating!”

“And what are you?” Izuru asked. “Ultimate Dissociative Identity Disorder patient?”

“Heyyy, that’s offensive!” the boy whined, looking plaintively to Izuru as if he were about to cry.

Izuru realized that was rather over the line. “Oof. Sorry, kiddo. I – “

But now the boy was laughing. “Oh, man, you actually fell for that! You’re the nutso around here if anything!”

“Now THAT was definitely offensive,” Izuru replied. “So. Kokichi, is it?”

“No,” Kokichi replied. “It’s actually Kaoru.”

Izuru waited.

“Nah, that was a lie!” Kokichi laughed, slapping his own knee. “Hey, you should play Othello with me! That way I don’t have to play by myself anymore! I’m sooo boooooored.”

“I’m not playin’ Othello with a kid,” Izuru snorted.

“Ohhhh, but you have to!” Kokichi whined.

“Gimme one good reason,” Izuru bade him.

Kokichi’s expression suddenly twisted into something utterly vile. “Because if you don’t, I’ll kill you.”

Izuru was caught completely off guard. Then he broke out into loud laughter. “Good one! Lemme guess again: Ultimate Liar?”

“Oh, no. I never lie.”

“Y’know what?” Izuru sat down across from Kokichi. “I’ll play you a round, just ‘cause I like your brass.”

“Yay!” Kokichi reset the game, looking cute as a button once more. “You can go first!”

He then proceeded to move first.

As they played, Izuru decided to find out a little more about this Kokichi. “So. You serious about killin’ me?”

“Dead serious. I am the Ultimate Supreme Leader, after all. I have thousands of minions
“waiting at my command.”

“So like a supervillain.”

“Basically. I’m well-versed in terrorism, extortion, genocide, and manufactured famine, to name a few.” This was all said as casually as could be.

Leading Izuru to suppose it was yet another lie. “I can see why they wanted you here. Though maybe it wasn’t the best idea to pick you up, knowing what you can do.”

“Oh, I could level the entire Academy if I wanted. But so long as they treat me nicely, I decide to spare everyone’s life by one more day. I haven’t been disappointed so far.”

“And what if I got you expelled first?” Izuru posed.

“The other members of D.I.C.E. wouldn’t like that,” Kokichi replied. “They’d come after you in a mob for revenge. We wouldn’t even kill you quickly. Do you prefer electrical torture or waterboarding?”

“I’m partial to the good old thumbscrews. Gotta keep it classic.”

“Great choice!” Kokichi replied. “I’m actually having an authentic iron maiden shipped in to D.I.C.E. headquarters, you know.”

“Is all this D.I.C.E. stuff actually legit, or are you spinnin’ tales again?”

“You will never know,” Kokichi said mischievously. “Actually, I would never kill a person. The very thought of it just grosses me out.”

“Uh-huhhhhh.”

“It’s true. Don’t you believe me?”

“Not sure.”

“Nee-hee-hee!”

Izuru found himself charmed by Kokichi. Perhaps, after he’d become the new consciousness piloting Hajime, he would seek Kokichi out. Test him to pass on No Name. “One more question for ya.”

“Shoot.”

“You know anything about the graffiti that showed up on the back of the building last week?”

“You mean the one that said ‘Jin Kirigiri sucks dick’?” Kokichi threw back his head into a raucous laugh. “I WISH I know who did that! They’d be my best friend. But I would never do something like that. I’m too afraid of getting expelled. What would D.I.C.E. think of me then?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Izuru replied. “’Sides, you’re too short to have reached that high, pipsqueak.”

“I know. That’s why I used a stepladder before I wrote it.”

Izuru chuckled again. “Kiddo, you are a piece of WORK.”
“Is that a compliment?”

“You tell me.”

Then, with the final placing of a tile, Izuru declared, “Looks like I win.”

“No faaaaiiiiiir!” Kokichi moaned, crocodile tears pouring from his eyes. “No fair, no fair, no fair!” He then quickly wiped them away to give Izuru a sparkly-eyed grin. “Just kidding! Actually, I let you win. I wanted you to have a false sense of security.”

“It’s not really false if you tell me about it.”

“But I’m a liar. How do you know what you can believe about me?”

Which was probably a really good reason he should never wield No Name. And yet Izuru didn’t want to rule him out completely. The kid could grow up to be a regular Warrior of Chaos if he put his mind to it. Maybe he already was, if that D.I.C.E. story was true. “See ya ‘round, kid.”

“Okay! But be careful! I might not decide to spare you next time.”

“I’ll consider myself warned.”

After that, Izuru ascended to the fourth level of the building, humming a little tune to himself. He certainly did not expect the door to the chemistry lab to literally explode open, erupting flames that gave the Promethean Fire a run for its money. Izuru leapt back, flinching from the heat.

“GLACIUS!” a high voice called out from inside. “…Glacius? FIRE EXTINGUISHUS!”

Then came the sound of an actual fire extinguisher.

“Phew.” A slight-framed redheaded girl exited the lab, mopping her brow. “If it wasn’t for my quick magic, we would’ve burned the school down.”

She was followed by a boy with fluffy white hair, a drab green hoodie draped around his upper body and the fire extinguisher in his arms. “Just my luck,” he remarked. “I should’ve known better than to play with fire.”

“What were you kids doin’ in there?” Izuru growled.

“Sorry!” the redhead cried. “All I was trying to do was brew my potions!”

Izuru shook his head. There were countless worlds where magic was a common practice. This was not one of them.

“I was only trying to catch up on my Chemistry homework,” the boy sighed, “and help Himiko with hers in the process. But unfortunately, I underestimated my own rotten luck. I’m probably the worst person Himiko could’ve asked for as a lab partner.”

“Don’t say that, Nagito,” Himiko replied.

“No, really,” Nagito argued. “It’s true.”

“I meant you’re not my lab partner. You’re my lovely assistant. You’re the one who lifts up the curtains when I make things disappear.”
“Oh, what an honor for someone as lowly as me! It instills a sense of hope in me…even if I am more homely than lovely.”

“Not gonna tell me how you blew up the chem lab, huh?” Izuru groaned. “Anyone else get hurt in there?”

“No,” Nagito replied. “I was the only one who got a little singed. I guess it just serves me right for existing.”

“I had it under control!” Himiko boasted, beaming. “I stopped him from getting any more hurt than he already was!”

“Thank you, Himiko, for bringing me so much hope.”

“I’m going to cast a hope spell to give you even more!”

Izuru shook his head as he moved past. “These kids are weird,” he muttered to himself.

On the fifth floor, he stopped into the dojo, wondering if he could get some practice in with No Name. He didn’t show the Keyblade around the school, for obvious reasons. He definitely didn’t transform it, as on this world, it liked to become a Hotchkiss Mle 1914, which would have been even worse to have on school grounds than a Keyblade.

However, as the dojo was occupied, he realized he would have to wait. A rather short, slender blond boy was practicing there, and not doing a great job at that. His punches were sloppy, his posture was horrid, and his kick –

Slammed right into Izuru’s face by accident.

Yet instead of apologizing, the boy yelled, “HEY! WATCH WHERE YOU’RE STANDING, DICKHEAD!”

“Rude much?” Izuru rubbed where he’d been kicked. “What’s your damage, kiddo?”

“My DAMAGE?” the boy yelled. “Do you even know who you’re talking to?”

“Why is that the third time today I’ve heard some variant of that question? First the Togami family, then this D.I.C.E. whatever…don’t tell me. Fenrir Corps?”

“Kuzuryu clan,” the boy muttered. “I’m Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu, dumbass.”

Well, that threat held more weight than any of them. “You’re the worst yakuza I’ve ever seen,” Izuru said plainly.

“Watch your fucking mouth!” Fuyuhiko snapped.

“Yeah, I can see this is gettin’ nowhere,” Izuru sighed. “I’m out. Thanks for the laughs, Baby Mafia.”

“WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL M – “

As Izuru exited the dojo, he heard a beeping coming from his tablet. It wasn’t officially an e-Handbook like the students carried, but it was of a similar design, and capable of receiving and dealing out text-based messages. Jin Kirigiri had just written him “Meet me on floor 1.”

“Weird,” Izuru muttered. “Not the basement?”
He decided to save some time and simply clipped through each floor one by one as a “new backdrop,” though he was pretty sure someone spotted him on the way down – a kid in a long black trenchcoat who had cried “SORCERY!” amid the squeaks of hamsters. Add to that the pink-and-neon-yellow blur that had emitted an unholy scream, making Izuru unsure of whether he’d startled a student or tripped a fire alarm. Finally, he arrived on the ground floor, only to see a new message roll in from Jin:

“Come to 77’s dorms.”

“Huh,” Izuru said as he walked in that direction. He was sure Jin had his reasons, but boy, were they going to end up being odd reasons.

In the common area, Izuru received another message: “Sorry. I should have been more clear. Dining hall.”

So he entered the dining area to see no Jin, but instead, a small student, hair light-brown, dressed in green and tapping at a laptop. Maybe she was the one who’d messaged him instead, which would mean she was both an excellent hacker and in for some detention once Izuru got word to Jin.

“Hey, kiddo,” Izuru greeted slyly as he sat down at the table next to who he believed to be a girl. As a matter of fact, the student wasn’t a girl, but Izuru had no way of knowing that. He could tell that this student had been assigned male at birth, but being Lustre, Myst, and others had taught him that if you see someone wearing a skirt, makeup, and long hair, you default with “she” until told otherwise. Those were the rules.

“Uh…hi,” the boy said nervously. “Is…everything okay?”

To Izuru’s surprise, a soft voice said from the screen, “Father? What’s wrong?”

“You weren’t usin’ that thing to message me, were ya?” Izuru asked. “Because lemme tell ya, hackin’ other people’s tablets…is…that’s Mega Man.”

The laptop couldn’t have been hacking into Izuru’s tablet, as it was currently in the midst of a boss fight between the little blue robot mascot and the ballerina-esque Tundra Man.

“I wasn’t hacking anything, I swear!” the boy defended. “I was just running simulations!”

“It…looks like you’re playing Mega Man,” Izuru countered.

“No, look!” The boy removed his fingers from the keyboard. “He moves on his own! See?”

The battle continued, even with the boy’s fingers high off the device. “Well, how about that,” Izuru muttered, rather awed. “So you made a game that plays itself.”

“Well, not really a game,” the boy said sheepishly. “It’s…more of a…well, it’s kinda weird. I don’t know if you really wanna hear – “

“I got time. Whatcha workin’ on, kiddo?”

“Well…I’m the Ultimate Programmer. My name is Chihiro Fujisaki. I’m working on an AI program that can completely simulate human thought and learn by intaking information and asking questions. I just wrapped up Phase 1, which I call ‘Alter Ego.’ Alter Ego was meant to be a digital copy of me that could act as an assistant, and…and I’m boring you, aren’t I?”
“No!” Izuru lied. “So what’s Phase 2?”

“Phase 2 is programming an AI with its own self-generated personality that isn’t based on my traits,” Chihiro went on. “I designed her avatar, but nothing else. I’ve just been letting her take the wheel. And…she really likes to play video games.”

“Mega Man is one of my favorites,” the soft voice said from the laptop.

“Why don’t you say hi?” Chihiro posed to the laptop.

“Oh,” the voice realized. “I should do that.”

A small window opened, showing Izuru a pink-haired girl in a blue hoodie. Her expression was too saccharine for his liking. “My name is Chiaki,” she introduced. “It is nice to meet you.”

“Chiaki…” Izuru mulled it over. “Heh. CHIhiro FujisAKI. Clever.”

“Thanks.” Chihiro blushed.

“Hmm.” Chiaki looked perturbed. “Your facial structure matches someone in my databanks.”

“No it doesn’t,” Izuru said hurriedly.

“You are almost an exact match for what Izuru Kamukura would have looked like had he survived to his nineties,” Chiaki identified.

“I get that a lot,” Izuru replied. “So, uh, you’re a gamer.”

“Yes,” Chiaki replied. “You can probably consider me the Ultimate Gamer, as my programming allows me to excel at most recreational software. I can hack code, but I prefer the challenge of playing with the surface interface like Chihiro would. It seems dating simulators are the only genre I am not good at. They are not as exciting anyway. I prefer games like Mega Man. Do you want to see me take on another robot master?”

“Sure,” Izuru said with a shrug. “But just one.”

Chiaki thought it over. “Okay. Just a minute.”

She closed out Mega Man 11, replacing it with a much older, more pixelated set of graphics. A save state was loaded that allowed Chiaki to proceed Mega Man directly toward Hard Man. Then the battle was on.

“Hard Man is my favorite,” Chiaki explained. “I find him just challenging enough, and also pleasantly designed.”

“Plus I bet you get a few laughs outta the name,” Izuru joked.

“Why is that?” Chiaki asked, befuddled.

“She doesn’t understand stuff like that yet.” Chihiro blushed.

“Eh, forget it.” Izuru waved it off.

He watched the fight conclude, then stretched out his arms above his head. “Well, that was fun, but I’m lookin’ for a pal of mine. Ya seen good ol’ headmaster Kirigiri around?”
“No,” Chihiro admitted. “Was he supposed to be here?”

“Yeah. Looks like I gotta kick his butt when I track him down.”

“I should leave, then.” Chihiro picked up the laptop and made tracks. “I don’t wanna interrupt your meeting. Have fun!”

Izuru gave a sigh as he looked around. “Yeah, some fun this is.”

The tablet beeped, and he checked the message once more to find the text “I’m in the kitchen.”

“Why are you in THERE?” Izuru asked the tablet out loud.

He then realized there was no name attached to this particular message. Nor had there been for the one before it. Odd, since they were a direct continuation of messages from Jin.

He walked into the kitchen anyway, hoping to get some answers.

The room was deserted, as far as Izuru could see. No one here, least of all Jin Kirigiri. He was ready to call it quits and leave when he realized there was a strange noise. Not to mention the room was very warm.

He tracked the noise, thinking back to when his Elezen ears would have given him more precision in the endeavor. Where was it coming from? There! There it was! A soft humming. A running electronic device.

Izuru realized it was coming from the oven. The oven had been preheated, and was running hot.

“What in the – “

That was when the knives stabbed into him from behind.

Izuru fell to his knees in intense pain. The knives weren’t meant to be the killing blow; merely to disable him from getting away. They’d been plunged into his thighs. They were subsequently removed.

Before Izuru could turn to get a look at his assailant, he was shoved headfirst into the oven, which was padlocked shut immediately.

Teleportation was useless. The high temperatures sizzled him immediately.

The assailant waited for Izuru to finish cooking to perfection, then undid the padlock. The charred corpse was brought out of the oven and laid out on the counter. A knife was chosen from the rack.

Methodically, Izuru Kamukura’s body was chopped into cuts that resembled steak and chicken, then put in wrappings labeled as such and stored in the meat freezer with the rest. Eyes, teeth, fingertips went down the garbage disposal: anything that could have identified the body.

They would never find him. He would be consumed without anyone’s knowledge. Jin Kirigiri would be left forever wondering what had happened on the day that Izuru Kamukura had disappeared.

The only one who knew was the killer. The killer who left nothing behind in the kitchen
save a small trail of pink glitter.

Downstairs, the boy who had been Hajime Hinata woke up. He had every talent known to humanity. But no heart.
Leerie Libidine

Chapter Notes

Featuring some more OCs created either in full or in part by Freeman! Also featuring more gore. It all gets worse from here, my friends.

Leerie Libidine locked eyes with his opponent. He raised his weapons, a pair of hand-crossbows with risers sharpened into blades. (No Name transformed, but no one needed to know that. This was the one world where he kept the blade transformed more often than not.)

Across the room, the raven-haired girl – accurately called Raven – glared him down with her crimson eyes. “Come at me.”

“You asked for it.”

She unsheathed her magnificent sword, slashing out toward Leerie in the process. He leapt so that the soles of his feet touched the blade’s flat, using that to leap up and aim his weapons down onto Raven. The blade spun to deflect all projectiles. Leerie front-flipped, landing behind Raven to slash at her with his bows’ risers; she deftly danced out of the way.

She turned to meet him, and his pair of blades clashed against her single sword again and again.

“You won’t win,” she seethed.

“Lose? ME?” he retorted.

He let only his right-hand bow clash with the sword now to keep it at bay. By the time Raven realized, it was too late. His other bow was raised and aimed.

It blasted off, taking a good chunk of her long, thick hair with it.

“VICTORY!” the headmaster called.

Leerie stepped back two paces and took a deep bow. “No offense, Harbinger of Doom, but I shine and you don’t.”

Raven scoffed.

It was true. He did shine. His long hair was white-blonde, gold under the correct light. He’d taken to wearing a lot of jewelry – yellow crystals that sparkled. Partly because his name alluded to light as its “color,” or at least one who lit lamps. Partly because it was his cheeky in-joke about the Earth Crystal and how he’d used it to “light up” Luxendarc. A leerie indeed.

“All right, that’s enough,” the headmaster said, bemused. “I believe it’s time for your grades.”

Raven and Leerie both approached him at the edge of the arena.
“You have both passed your practical exam,” Ozpin said contentedly. “I am proud to call you Huntsman and Huntress.”

“I may now kiss the bride?” Leerie joked.

Raven scoffed.

“As if,” Leerie told her. “Trust me, you’re not my type.”

Raven had never liked Leerie. She had never liked Ozpin. She turned and stalked away without a word.

“Geez.” Leerie watched her go. “You sure giving that one her license was the right move?”

“As certain as humanly possible,” Ozpin stated. “Or inhumanly, at that.”

“Guess it’s time to go out there into the big, bad world and get myself a career,” Leerie declared. “Gotta be easy, now that I’m Huntsman material, right?”

It was not, in fact, easy.

He was still looking for an apprentice. As he had been doing for the last few turns since Izuru (and in each lifetime, stewing in anger over the one who’d murdered him, whoever that was).

Here in this world, all sorts of students were training to wield weapons of ridiculous proportions. If there was any place to find No Name’s bearer, it was here. Yet that would mean Leerie would have to get back into the education system, and that had just worked out so well all the other times, hadn’t it?

So he sought a shortcut. A back road. Of which there did not seem to be one.

Until whispers reached him of Salem, master of the Darkness on this world.

That sounded like exactly his speed.

He sat at the far chair in Salem’s stronghold, feet up and ankles crossed on the table. The other four there who looked remotely human – a woman with long red hair, a scorpion-tailed man who perched on his chair, a handsome-faced man of perfect posture, and a bulky muscleman – stared down at him with derision. Even the scorpion-man knew better than to put his feet on the table.

Yet the woman at the head of the table, the one who did not look human at all due to her red eyes and snow-pale skin and hair, smiled sweetly at the newest recruit. “Welcome to the fold, Leerie,” she stated.

“Good to be here!” Leerie pantomimed raising a goblet. “I was starting to think nobody around here had my sense of fun.”

“If you consider senseless destruction ‘fun,’” the elegant one sniffed.

“Even my destruction has SENSE to it,” the scorpion-man added.

“I think you’re just mad ‘cause I got my feet on the table,” Leerie said with a grin.

“I believe this partnership can be beneficial,” Salem told him. “I will get what I want, and
you will get what you want. I suspect you’re after something a little more than just…amusement.”

“Maybe.” Leerie shrugged. “I get the feeling this ain’t exactly a place where people are open and honest about their motives.”

“I would prefer, of course, for you to prove your worth,” Salem went on. “Perhaps you can start small, and based on your success or lack thereof…we can decide what position you will hold.”

Leerie shrugged. “Fair, I guess. I mean, if you really don’t trust me that much.”

“In our business, it does not pay to trust,” Salem told him. “You’d do well to remember that.”

“Sounds like somebody got her heart bro – “

Salem’s glare turned bright and venomous; she practically hissed at Leerie. The scorpion-man let out a chuckle.

“So how ‘bout that weather?” Leerie said quickly. “Nice and gloomy. Perfect day!”

“Tch.” The black-haired woman shook her head. “Almost as intolerable as…” Whatever she’d been about to say turned into an epiphany. “Actually, I think I know exactly where we can station our new guest.”

“Do tell,” Salem encouraged. “Are you planning to add him to your band of elite misfits?”

“More or less.” The black-haired woman turned back to Salem. “I’ve gathered two who will answer directly to me. You’ll be introduced if they prove themselves. An alliance with the White Fang is still a work in progress. Then there’s…the last loose end. As a temporary White Fang liaison and in order to procure supplies for the planned cataclysm, I’ve reached out to make ties in the criminal underworld. My contact there is…free-spirited. I could use someone else of higher rank to keep him in line, in case he gets any ideas of treachery.”


“He isn’t a child,” the woman snapped, “however much he might ACT like it. All the same, you are to be his supervisor and make sure he does NOT deviate from the assigned plan.”

“This sounds like an excellent chance for Leerie to prove himself,” Salem agreed with a nod.

“Well, if he’s not a kid,” Leerie sighed, “he’s gonna be some stiff with no sense of fun, or a goofball who’s had too much sugar. I know exactly how this game goes. Just show me who I’m supposed to pretend not to hate for the next year of my life already.”

“Oooooo-kay,” the carrot-topped, mascara-lined, bowler-hat-bearing man said to Leerie as a form of greeting. “Let’s just get the ground rules out of the way, Sparkles.”

“It’s Leerie,” Leerie corrected.

“Hmm…no.” The man pretended to ponder it. “Seeing as you’re wearing enough bling to be seen from the moon, I’m gonna go with Sparkles.”
“You know turnabout’s fair play, right, Bowler Hat?”

The man snapped a sole finger-gun at Leerie; “Yes! Bowler Hat! A little on the nose, but I like it!”

His actual name was Roman Torchwick. Which had a ring to it. Not as much as “Leerie Libidine,” but it was sufficiently spiffy.

“Anyway.” Roman turned to spread out his arms to indicate the large, open storeroom in which they both stood. “Welcome to lair, sweet lair. I’ve got a safehouse downtown, and you’re welcome to crash if I decide you’re cool, but we’re gonna spend most of our time here. Got it?”

“Got it,” Leerie repeated, casting his gaze about.

“Now, rule number one.” Roman gestured to the piles of crates stacked against the wall. “You see that? That’s raw Dust. The uncut stuff. I stole it. All of it. Applaud anytime.”

Leerie gave him a sole clap without thinking of it.

“Thank you,” Roman said with a nod. “Anyway, I’m sure you already know this, but that’s enough Dust to obliterate half the fucking kingdom of Vale. So rule number one is no open flames in the storeroom. There are plenty of side rooms if you need a smoke break.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Well, I do, and you’re not gonna mind. That’s not a question.”

Leerie shrugged. “Your business.”

“Also, no pyro stuff in here. Save it for the vandalism run.”

“I’m not a pyro either. Guessin’ you are, though.”

“You catch on quick.” Roman winked. At least, Leerie thought he did. It was hard to tell, with that sweep of hair covering his eye. “What is your M.O., anyway?”

Leerie shrugged again. “Firearms.”

“Nice! A man after my own heart. Okay, rule number two: snitches get stitches and no cops at Pride. Got it? You rat me out, I don’t care if you’re the Dark God himself. You’re dead.”

“Duly noted.” Leerie nodded. “Reasonable, so far. What next?”

“Rule number three…” Roman cast his gaze around the storeroom. “Neo?” he called out. He turned around to crane his neck back to look atop the highest stack of crates; “HEY, NEO!”

The young woman materialized out of thin air right next to him, on the side where he wasn’t looking, and tapped his shoulder playfully.

“FUCKING – “ Roman was startled, flinching before he scowled at her. She was chuckling silently. “Don’t do that, jerk.” He gave her a playful shove on the shoulder. “Anyway, this is Neo.”

Neo waved excitedly at Leerie.

“Assassin, getaway car – this woman does it all! She’ll be your best friend!”
Neo formed a heart with her hands.

“Also, no, she doesn’t talk, but you’re not gonna mind that either.”

Neo shook her head.

“And rule number three is if you fuck with Neo, she will kill you. I don’t even have to enforce that rule.”

Neo’s smile turned wicked, and she drew a finger across her neck.

“So…” Leerie pointed back and forth between the two. “Are you two an item or somethin’?”

Roman let out a harsh laugh before answering, “NnnnnnnNO. Rule number four: don’t ask again.”

Neo was making a gagging motion, pointing to the back of her throat.

“Seriously, IT GETS OLD,” Roman insisted. “Lucky for you, that means we’re both on the market. Take some time and think about it.”

Leerie had to admit Neo was on the attractive side, but he found a lot of people aesthetically pleasing. It didn’t mean he wanted to do anything about it. So much for Luxuria. You couldn’t really build a relationship with someone who reincarnated across worlds and had seen eternity, after all.

“Neo, this is Leerie, but I’m callin’ him Sparkles ‘cause of the bling,” Roman introduced. “Salem sent him to babysit us. And I am just praying to both gods that he’s not a boring stiff.”

“Y’know, I said the same thing about you back at base,” Leerie realized. “Same wavelength.”

“That brings us to rule number four,” Roman concluded. “…Wait. Five. The whole thing about not asking about me and Neo was an ad-lib. Anyway, rule number five: for your initiation ceremony, we’re going down to Junior’s to get wasted and dance our asses off. My treat. Why is it my treat? Because if it turns out you don’t dance, you don’t drink, or you don’t like fun, I’m sending you back where you came from in a box with a nice little bow, Salem be damned. So. Whaddaya think?” He gave a dramatic shrug.

“I…think…” Leerie stared in awe. “I think you sound EXACTLY like my kind of people.”

Neo hopped up and down in place, clapping furiously.

“Any chance of us wreaking mayhem later?” Leerie asked. “Say, adding to the Dust collection, or just shaking things up?”

“You ARE my people,” Roman realized with a slack jaw. “Whatever you want! Robbery! Vandalism! Jaywalking! We’ve got all night!”

Neo seized the arms of both men, dragging them out of the warehouse gleefully.

Leerie woke up the next morning curled up on top of a set of Dust crates. His shirt was on inside-out, and there were aerosol paint stains on his cuffs.
He had no memory of what had happened the night prior.

As Roman wandered into the room, Leerie stretched out, grunting, “What time is it?”

“You don’t wanna know,” Roman told him.

“Any idea what happened last night?”

“Yeah,” Roman replied. “You tore the place UP. I recorded most of it.”

He approached Leerie to show him a video of the blond aggressively grooving on the dance floor of Junior’s nightclub, the strobe lights making his jewelry shimmer.

“And following that, you tore THIS place up. Literally.”

The next video was of a jewelry shop burning down.

“Check your wrist, by the way.”

Leerie raised his right wrist, where he usually wore his glittering yellow bracelet.

“Other wrist, Sparkles.”

Well, that bracelet hadn’t been there before. Nor did it match Leerie’s color scheme.

“Before you say it,” Roman told him, “you were WAY drunker than me. Don’t worry about it. The rest of the stock’s in back. You can pick out something that actually coordinates. Though what I will say about that ugly piece of shit – “

He raised his own arm, pulling down the sleeve to reveal a matching one. “Is you swiped me a matching one as a ‘best friends’ bracelet, and yes, Neo has a third.”

“You can take it off,” Leerie assured him. “It is pretty ugly. Ugh, what was I thinking?”

“You also proposed to Neo last night with one of the rings,” Roman went on. “Gorgeous stone. Color, cut, and clarity were all PERFECT. She said no, of course, and I am NEVER letting you drink a Patch Island Iced Tea again, let alone FIVE of them.”

“Were those the tangy fizzy ones?”

“Yup.”

“Aw, c’mon. Half? Those were too good.”

“Nuh-uh.” Roman shook his head. “I thought you were supposed to be the one policing me, not the other way around.”

“So…what do we do today?”

“Well, I had assumed your hangover would be worse, so I didn’t really PLAN anything. But as I said, we have an entire jewelry store’s stock in one of the side rooms. C’mon. Neo’s playing princess with it.”

Leerie followed Roman to where Neo was draped in jewelry of all colors, making her look resplendent. Leerie could now see why he’d proposed. “Uh…hi,” he greeted. “So I hear I made you wear an ugly bracelet last night, and you have my full permission to get rid of – “
She slung it against the wall before he could even finish the sentence.

“Y’know, you two did one more thing last night,” Roman brought up innocently. “I even got it on tape.”

Leerie swallowed hard. “Don’t tell me…”

Roman put the scroll in his face. The screen showed him pumping a civilian’s body full of ammo as Neo sliced off the corpse’s head.

“That’s better than what I thought you were gonna show me,” Leerie admitted. “Y’know, it’s actually satisfying getting to do that on purpose instead of letting it happen to get the future right.”

“What?”

“What?”

Neo shrugged.

“We can do this again when I’m actually conscious for it, right?” Leerie asked.

“All damn day, every day!” Roman said with a smile.

“Between Cinder assignments,” Leerie reminded him. “That’s kiiinda why I’m here in the first place.”

“Right.” Roman slumped, and Neo deflated as well. “Any word today?”

“Not yet. We can have a little fun.”

Roman clapped his hands together. “Good, ‘cause we need to move this stuff on the black market. After we skim the best for ourselves, of course. Let’s see…what matches your whole light-yellow scheme going on…?”

Roman gave himself a new watch. Neo armed herself with necklaces and bracelets. Leerie added a second yellow-crystal bracelet around his wrist, swapping his stud earrings for teardrops of the same color.

“See, I knew you were man enough to rock a little glam,” Roman said with a smile. Neo punctuated this with a thumbs-up.

“Heh…yeah.” Leerie was seized by an impulse: “On that note…got any spare eyeliner? I’m feelin’ pretty today.”

“House rule six: Roman Torchwick makeup is Roman Torchwick makeup. Get your own.”

“Fair.”

The following month was a whirlwind of Dust robberies, vandalisms, arson, heavy drinking, and dancing. It seemed someone had finally upset Emet-Selch’s best-friend crown. Now all Roman and Neo needed to do was not betray Leerie in the end.

He’d been more drawn to Roman at first. Understandably so. He was louder. Anyone would look at him first. But as time went on, things began to change.
For one, the trio split up missions to get more ground covered. When not on assignment from Cinder and Salem, they divided the work in every combination possible. One night, Roman had a particular Dust robbery he wanted to handle himself (and with a few of Junior’s hired hands) while Leerie and Neo were left to their own devices.

“So…whaddaya usually do for fun when Bowler Hat ain’t home?” Leerie asked tentatively. It was the first time the two of them had hung out alone. He was slightly worried that it would be awkward – if he wasn’t able to read her body language, this would go downhill fast.

But as it turned out, he’d spent enough time around her to grasp her meanings. Also, she was really good at pantomime. Leerie suspected she usually communicated through sign language, but he’d never bothered to learn it, so she kept it simple for him.

And the various methods of instant death she was miming on herself gave Leerie a pretty picture of her idea of fun.

“…Oh,” he commented. “Well…we can do that. You got a target, or do we just hit at random?”

Neo shrugged.

“So whatever we want, huh?” Leerie read. “Okay. I’m down. Let’s go spill some blood.”

Blood was, indeed, spilled. The street ran red with rivulets of it. “Did you know that guy?” Leerie asked.

Neo shook her head.

“No beef with him?”

Shake.

“I mean, that’s great and all, but don’t tell me you don’t have some vengeance in there somewhere. I dunno, guy who was rude to you on the train one day or something?”

Neo’s gestures indicated that she had plenty of people like that, but she had no way to track their whereabouts.

“Well, let me know next time, and we’ll have ourselves a manhunt,” Leerie said, raising his crossbows. “In the meantime, R for reload!” The purple ammunition blazed brightly.

More fell, in a night that would be known as the night of the “Vale Rippers.” After the last of them, Leerie looked to Neo, whose face was half-wet with someone else’s blood.

She took in the bloodstains on his shirt.

Then their eyes met, connecting over the shared adrenaline.

And before either knew it, their lips had met, too.

“So YOU two are the thing now.”

Neo nodded excitedly to Roman, who sat to her left at the small bar. Leerie sat on her right, arm around her waist.
This was, unbelievably, the first time he’d attempted something like this. It wasn’t going to end well, and he knew it. No way he could tell her about No Name. And how would she factor into the quest for the apprentice? He’d gone incredibly off-book.

But it was the first time he’d felt this strongly about anyone in recent memory, and it simply didn’t feel right to let it slip away. To let her slip away. Beautiful, wonderful, bloodthirsty Neo, with whom life was never boring.

“That’s wonderful!” the bartender at the Crow Bar cried, passing out drinks. “Congratulations!”

“Is this your fucking business?” Roman knocked back half his glass. “No. No, it’s not.”

“Sorry.” The bartender turned around and resumed washing dishes.

“Is this guy on the up-and-up?” Leerie asked.

Roman sighed. “He just gets overly invested in…everything. He’s harmless. You could tell him you were gonna commit a murder, time and place, and he wouldn’t care. HEY, OVERLY INVESTED BARTENDER. I’M GONNA KILL SOMEBODY TONIGHT AT MIDNIGHT IN VALE PLAZA. GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT?”

“Well, that’s not very nice,” the bartender replied.

“See?” Roman shrugged. “It’s worth it. The Crow Bar is the only place around here you can get a drink in peace and quiet. Sometimes, you just don’t want to have to yell over the club music.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Leerie raised his glass. “Cheers.” He downed it. “So what did you get up to last night?”

“Hoo boy.” Roman gave a hefty sigh. “So the whole thing got botched because, get this, a KID showed up. Little bitch in red. Huge scythe.”


“Are people with scythes just bad apples?”

Neo nodded; yes, they were.

“Luckily, the odds of THAT happening again are zero,” Roman stated before polishing off his drink. “No, trust me, if I see that bitch again, it’s OVER. She is DEAD.”

“What if she brings all her little punk teenage friends?”

“Don’t even joke, Sparkles.”

Roman also needed to handle the next job alone. A meetup with the White Fang. As he put it, Leerie and Neo could have a “date night.”

This was a little tamer than their prior outings. Now, they needed to get to know each other, and Leerie wanted to test the waters with just how much he could reveal. So they strolled the back streets, enjoying each other’s company.

“So, uh…you graduate a Huntsman academy?” Leerie asked.
Neo shook her head.

“Thought not. Trust me, ‘s not worth it. Y’know, I…I didn’t exactly have a plan for what I was gonna do with my license.”

Neo gestured; had he not intended to simply be a Huntsman, traveling the country as needed?

“Yeah, well, it’s…complicated.” Leerie laughed. “Oh, man, he would box my ears for that.”

Neo gave him a confused look.

“Old friend. Maybe I’ll tell you more about him someday. My past’s kind of a…sticky subject.”

She pointed at herself, then held up two fingers. Me-two.

“Heh…guess we both got that goin’ on. Good for us. We really do make a pair, don’t we? Anyway, I thought for a while I was gonna get into teaching. Maybe. Problem is I hate kids.”

Neo gave a shrug and a look of immense bafflement.

“How do I explain this? I need a successor. It’s not up for debate. That’s why I signed the contract with Salem to begin with. It can’t just be anybody. It’s gotta be somebody young, strong…not completely annoying.”

More gestures.

“You? Nah, I couldn’t – you’re not – look, the way we are, I don’t want you to be under me. …Yeah, that came out wrong. But me as your literal master? Not a good look. You’re too much your own person for that.” As much as he wanted to let her in on the scheme.

More gestures still.

“What, Bowler Hat? Not gonna work. He’s…I need somebody a little more hardcore. Don’t tell him I said this, but he’s not cut out for it. He’s better off doin’ stuff like this. The robberies, painting the town red, painting the town other colors with spray paint…I dunno if I wanna get him wrapped up in all my drama.” He scowled. “Not sure if I wanna get you mixed up in it, either.”

Neo put her hands on her hips, glaring up at him.

“Not that I don’t think you could handle it!” Leerie said hastily. “Just…I like you, okay? And without making too big a deal of it, I wanna keep you safe and make your life as easy as possible while still allowing for the thrill of the chase to make it fun. I’m knee-deep in some bad stuff, Li’l Ice Cream. Dunno I can tell you what, just yet. …But maybe I can give you a clue. What if I told you ‘Leerie’ wasn’t the first first name I had?”

Neo’s eyes widened.

“It was ‘Luxu,’” Leerie went on. “Don’t ask why. Don’t ask why I changed it. But I was…a whole other person before I got to this point. A more pathetic one, actually.”

Neo walked without making a gesture for several paces. Then, tentatively, gestured and hoped he’d pick up the hint.
“…‘Neo’ wasn’t your first first name, either?”

She shook her head.

“You don’t owe me the first one,” Leerie told her. “With all the stuff I keep from you, it’s only fair you get – wait – are you signing it out?”

He watched her trace each letter. Then she explained why it had changed; all that had happened to bring her into Roman’s care. The hardships she’d suffered alone before finding him. The way he’d changed everything, becoming her only family.

Leerie vowed to keep it all secret. These were things that only concerned Roman, Neo, and himself. Things that not even narration has any right to reveal.

“Look, you’re gonna make me feel bad about not tellin’ you mine,” Leerie grunted.

She was asking a different question: what are you looking for in your successor?

“I told you.”

But not enough. Not with detail.

“Okay, so…young, like I said. Somebody I can teach. Yeah, that sounds mind-control-y, but that’s the business I’m in. I guess somebody with a rougher edge. Maybe not as outright criminal as us. I could dial it back. But somebody who isn’t picture-perfect, at any rate. Somebody fun to talk to, so I don’t get sick of ‘em over the next few years. Prior experience with weapons a plus. I dunno, quippy comebacks. Quirky kiddos. Lovable losers with a mean streak. That make sense?”

Neo nodded. She let him know she hoped she could help him find them one day.

“Thanks, Li’l Ice Cream. That’s really not your job. But thanks.”

She tugged on his sleeve, and he turned, leaning down a bit to let her peck his lips by going up on tiptoe.

Overcome by a surge of impulse, Leerie changed his mind. He would tell her. He would tell her everything, even if she wouldn’t believe it. “Actually…have you ever heard of something called the Age of F – “

Sudden voices approaching: “I think he went this way!”

“Guys, this is a bad idea. This is SUCH a bad idea.”

“How do you know he went THIS way? Are you just making shit up?”

Leerie and Neo fell silent. They exchanged glances.

And then Leerie’s crossbows were drawn, as well as Neo’s blade.

The four speakers rounded the corner. It was a bunch of kids. A quartet, in fact. Well, maybe not kids. They looked to be first-years at Beacon, making them seventeen, sixteen at youngest. When Leerie spotted the token female of the group, he thought at first it was the same girl who’d accosted Roman, until he realized she wasn’t wearing red but raspberry, and Roman
would have accounted for that difference.

Neo put her finger to her lips and crept closer, melting into the shadows.

Leerie took stock of them. The leader, tall with curly red hair peeking out from beneath a top hat; no visible weapon. The one who probably thought he was the leader, dark-haired and scruffy, chest puffed, robes of flowing purple and an actual staff like what a wizard would wield. The girl, leggings under a skirt, a jaunty hat over her short blonde hair, a clunky utility belt that clashed with the rest of her outfit, a wrist brace that had some sort of apparatus attached. The strongman, bespectacled, sandy-haired, one arm replaced by a cybernetic prosthetic, a pair of curved swords like enormous fish hooks strapped to his back in an X.

“Bad idea,” he was saying. “Bad, bad, BAD idea.”

“Oh, be quiet, Topaz,” the one in the purple robes sighed. The strongman’s clothing was in fact blue, and to that effect, cut to be reminiscent of pirate’s garb. “Do you really wanna be known as ‘that guy from Team DERT’ for the rest of your life?”

“We all will be,” the leader reminded him. “It’s literally our team name.”

“You know what he meant!” the blonde groaned.

“I’m just saying once we bring in Torchwick, everyone will have to start taking us seriously,” the one in purple went on. “We’ll finally be the stars of the show.”

“I mean, I’d love that,” the leader in the top hat remarked, “but do you really think that’s how it’s gonna work? Also, aren’t your priorities a bit out of order?”

“I’m just in this to stop Torchwick,” the girl said with a shrug. “…And maybe a LITTLE bit to gain universal validation and approval with a side of fame. But mostly to do the right thing.”

“You guys are a bunch of narcissists,” Topaz sighed.

“And that’s why you love us,” the purple-robed boy teased.

“I hate that you’re right,” Topaz grumbled.

The top-hatted one had stopped all of a sudden. “Dawn?” the blonde asked. “What’s up? You okay?”

The one called Dawn hissed a harsh “Shhhh!”

Leerie observed. This was where it would get good.

Then, without warning, Dawn screamed “GET DOWN!” and tackled the purple-robed boy.

“What the HELL?” the purple-robed boy yelled as he was tackled.

Neo’s blade cut through the night air above them, shimmering in the moonlight. She dispelled the shadow-cover from herself, becoming visible.

“Hey!” the blonde yelled. “What the fuck did you do that for?”

“A girl?” Topaz identified. “Oh, don’t tell me. The kind of girl who can kick our asses.”

“So basically, one of your waifus,” the purple one grumbled from the ground. “Dawn, get
OFF me.”

Dawn scrambled to their feet, plucking the top hat from atop their head and converting it to a razor-edged disc with a flick of the hand. “Ras,” he commanded. “Beat it!”

Ras – or, more accurately, Raspberry – knew this command. She darted back around the corner, leaving her team behind.

“Well, well.” Leerie took several dramatic steps forward. “That’s some team loyalty you’ve got there, all right. I’d hate to see what would happen if you DIDN’T like each other.”

“I am very confused right now.” The purple one stood. “Are you guys, like, Roman Torchwick’s less-sexy flunkies or something?”

“EXCUSE you,” Leerie retorted. “I’m the SEXIER Roman Torchwick.”

“HEY HEY HEY!” Dawn steered the purple one out of the way of Neo’s blade a second time. “Will you actually pay attention to the bad guys, Eminence? I know I’m supposed to carry the team, but not like this!”

“Dawn, Eminence, Ras, Topaz,” Leerie rattled off. “Well, whaddaya know. They actually did name you guys DERT. Sucks to be you.”

“Oh, like your team name was so cool,” Topaz grunted.

“Oh, you mean Team LZLI?” He pronounced it “Lazuli.”

The three stared at him before muttering in chorus that that name was pretty cool.

“So you’re lookin’ to take out Torchwick,” Leerie said as Topaz yanked Eminence out of the way of Neo yet again.

“Okay, stop, STOP.” Eminence swatted at Topaz. “I get it. This is starting to get embarrassing.” He turned to point to his eyes with two fingers, then to Neo. “I’m watching you.”

Neo shrugged, then melted back into the shadows.

“Dammit,” Eminence grumbled, taking several tentative steps back.

Meanwhile, Dawn had stepped forth to face Leerie, their razor disc at the ready. “Yes, we are. You have some kind of problem with that?”

“Do I have a problem with you trying to throw my best buddy in the slammer?” Leerie retorted. “Or are you tryin’ to bump him off?”

“So yeah, you have a problem with that,” Dawn realized. They steeled their resolve; “Well, too bad! Because we’re gonna put an end to his tyrannical reign of…tyranny…okay, I did NOT think that line through but you know what I mean!”

Eminence tapped the globe of his staff on the ground; it lit up with a bright green glow, either Dust or Aura. “Ready when you are,” he said.

Topaz let out a long groan. “Goddamn cursed swords better not fuckin’ fuck me over this time I swear to – “

“Li’l Ice Cream,” Leerie suggested, “whaddaya say we bury this DERT in the ground?”
“GO!” Dawn yelled. “GO, GO, GO, THAT’S A FINAL BOSS BATTLE STARTER LINE!”

Eminence’s staff swung; a projectile of gleaming green soared toward Leerie. He shot it out of the air, rushing Eminence with both bow-blades swinging. Topaz got to Leerie first, catching one riser-blade in each hook-sword. Dawn swung the disc over Eminence’s head, clanging it off Neo’s sword.

“What is your thing with me?” Eminence yelled at her. “Are you hitting on me or something? I’m not into girls!”

Neo shrugged. Eminence’s staff now glowed red, but he launched it up, not toward her.

Neo, sensing the goal of this play, dove and rolled. Raspberry, the forgotten one, had used the delay to get to the roof of the nearest shop, from which she rapid-fired small projectiles from a wrist-mounted crossbow. They pierced through Eminence’s red sphere, becoming a spray of fiery red raindrops as they hurtled to the ground, forcing Neo to keep rolling and rolling to evade them.

“So you’ve got an archer too!” Leerie crowed, raising a foot to kick Topaz in the gut. Topaz stumbled back, but as Leerie attempted to move in, he felt the point of one of the hook-swords digging into his shoulder from behind. “You know, that’s – that’s really not fair – the whole crossbow thing was my – okay, that HURTS.”

“Now YOU know!” Topaz hooked Leerie’s other shoulder and used the swords as leverage to slam his head down into the concrete. “Now YOU know what it’s like to be screwed over by these swords!”

“TOPAZ, CAN YOU SHUT UP ABOUT THE SWORDS FOR LIKE TWO FUCKING MINUTES?” Dawn cried, launching the disc. “NOTHING EVEN WENT WRONG YET! GODS!”

The disc bounced off the nearby wall of the building Raspberry stood atop, then ricocheted toward its true target: Neo. She leapt, front-flipping over the disc as it buzzed through the air. Dawn skidded in behind her to catch it once more, wielding it melee and swiping it toward her again and again.

Leerie, in the meantime, was on the run from Raspberry’s fire, which was now an icy blue. “Last warning,” he growled. “Crossbows are MY gimmick!”

His ammunition blazed up toward her; she fell back onto the roof to avoid being riddled with holes.

Reveling in the victory, Leerie was slammed by the next orb from Eminence’s staff.

“Y’know,” Eminence remarked, “you really aren’t that bad-looking. I don’t usually go for blondes, but, y’know, I can see the appeal.” He raised the staff again; once more it was green. “Also, that whole evil archer thing and the earring aesthetic really work for you.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be one of the good guys?” Leerie asked, conjoining the two crossbows to make their new ultimate form: a black metal missile launcher that rested on his shoulder.

They both fired at the same time; the projectiles cancelled each other out.

“Yeah, well, heroes are boring as shit,” Eminence stated.
“YES!” Dawn cried in exasperation. “YES, WE ARE THE GOOD GUYS! FUCK! DON’T MAKE HIM THINK WE’RE ON HIS SIDE!”

“Oh, like you weren’t totally talking about how Roman Torchwick was ‘goals’ last week,” Eminence accused.

“We’ve all had that fantasy!” Dawn protested.

“I definitely heard them say it,” Raspberry said as she reappeared from around the corner. “Not that I blame them. Or you. Or Topaz for saying Roman made him question his sexuality.”

“I never said th – “

“Also, crossbow not worky, so Semblance time.” Raspberry clenched her fist, surrounding it with a solid sphere of blue Aura. “Force of Will! Mega Attack!”

She then decked Leerie in the face with the hard globe.

“Heyyyy, calling out attacks like anime fights is my thing!” Topaz protested. Then, to show Raspberry up, he whirled at Neo, both hook-swords spinning round and round, while crying out, “Super ancient curse of the seven seas eye of the hurricane!”

Neo simply sidestepped and let him spin past her. Then ducked Dawn’s disc. Which opened her up for one of Eminence’s projectiles to explode at her feet and catapult her across the street.

“I got it!” Raspberry yelled, tossing the blue sphere off her hand. It forged itself into a wriggling rope that chased after Neo, linking around her ankles to bind her.

“Snake!” Eminence yelled, leaping up into Topaz’s arms and forcing him to drop the hook-swords. “Fucking snake! We talked about this, Raspberry!”

“This situation called for a snake, so I used a snake!” Raspberry yelled. “Also… I’m so sorry. I am so, so, so sor – “

“RAS, LOOK OUT!”

Leerie was aiming his launcher directly at the girl’s back. Topaz did the first thing he could think of, which was to hurl Eminence at her so they both went bowling over each other beneath the arc of Leerie’s missile.

“I love you too, Topaz,” Eminence grunted as he peeled himself off Raspberry.

“That was my fault too, wasn’t it?” Raspberry babbled. “Sorrysorrysorrysorry – “

Dawn’s disc glanced off Leerie’s riser-blades. Neo rushed to stab them from behind, but Topaz slid a hook-sword between the two of them. “Not so fast,” he stated. “Where do you think you’re going with that? Also, do you have a license for being grade-A waifu material?”

“Not now, Topaz!” his three teammates screamed shrilly.

Topaz shrugged. “A guy’s gotta try.”

“Y’know,” Leerie pointed out, “for the good guys, you’re awful… quippy. And selfish.”

“That’s our brand!” Eminence said proudly.
“I thought our brand was fucking up,” Raspberry countered. “You know, ‘Oh, thanks, Team DERT. You made it worse. You blew up the bathroom and killed Professor Oobleck.’”

“We’ve never done THAT,” Topaz argued.

Eminence held up a finger; “Yet.”

“So you’re kinda…rough around the edges?” Leerie realized.

“Maybe?” Dawn replied. “I’m really not sure what you’re going for here. Are you trying to tempt us to the dark side or something?”

“I think he’s trying to tempt us to the dark side,” Topaz agreed.

“I mean, if it means I get a shot at fucking Roman Torchwick, sign me up,” Eminence said with a shrug.

That got his teammates to yell in unison, “NOT NOW, EMINENCE!”

“I hate to cut the party short,” Leerie said, “but my gal and I have got places to be.” He zapped himself to Neo’s side; Neo glared at him indignantly. “SCENE CHANGE!”

And then they both were gone.

“Did they really leave, or are they invisible again?” Raspberry flinched from the shadows.

“I think only the girl could turn invisible,” Topaz mused. “I’d been tracking their abilities while we fought, and she was the only one who ever did it. Now, the guy, he has some kind of space-bending Semblance – “

“Aaaaand we’re going to be listening to Topaz rattling off their battle specs for the next THREE HOURS,” Eminence grunted.

“Maybe we can still catch up to Torchwick if we hurry,” Dawn suggested, not realizing that the airship that passed over their head in the skies high above had Roman Torchwick already on it, making a getaway.

“Let’s GO!” Raspberry yelled, and the team had taken off running again.

Back in the warehouse, Neo squirmed out of Leerie’s grip before firing him a look asking him what, exactly, his problem was.

“This is gonna sound crazy,” he said in awe, “but I think I just found my answer.”

Neo’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah, I KNOW they’re the ‘good guys.’” He put air-quotes around the term. “But they had everything I wanted. Banter. Panache. A side of entertainment. All I need is to actually get them to go to the dark side. And if Bowler Hat were up for being hired out as an escort, I’d HAVE the purple one.”

Neo thought it over. Her motionlessness, save the finger against her chin that indicated she was pondering, left Leerie slightly worried. Was this the part where he had to choose between the Master’s wishes and the only person he’d ever connected to on this level?

Her next set of gestures assured him that if he really wanted to keep those kids alive and
take them under his wing, she would support that, but he had to find her some juicy new targets to murder in their place.

“Done deal,” Leerie said quickly. “You’re the best, babe.”

Neo winked, indicating that she knew that. Then a perturbed expression crossed her face as she paced behind Leerie.

“Babe? What’re you – “

She poked him, and an immense wave of pain rocked through him. Oh, that was right. Topaz had hooked him with both swords. He probably had a couple waterfalls of blood going on back there.

Neo took Leerie by the hand, leading him to a back room where she dug out a first-aid kit that had obviously seen a lot of use. Then she set to work measuring out bandages and sanitizing cleansing rags.

The door slammed open. Roman burst into the room. “WAS YOUR NIGHT AS BAD AS MINE?” he screamed.

“Depends,” Leerie told him. “You got a pair of open wounds in your back thanks to some kid with a pair of pirate swords?”

“…No. Okay, then. Carry on.”

Team DERT may have been the subject of interest for Leerie, but Team RWBY was the one giving Roman all the trouble. He had Leerie briefed on his two latest thorns in the side: a dark-haired Faunus with cat ears and her blond friend with a penchant for bananas.

When Roman was due to present his speech and an Atlesian Paladin to the White Fang at the rally, Neo and Leerie agreed to come along to secure the area. Neo would remain close to Roman, a bodyguard. Meanwhile, Leerie would plant himself in the crowd, seeking out anyone who wasn’t on the guest list.

Watching Roman proselytize onstage was like watching a theatrical production. Leerie was almost distracted out of his duty. It was the sudden glimpse of black and yellow that snapped him out of it.

Cat ears. Monkey tail.

Roman had bade his new followers come forth, and the two of them were stalling. They had to be the ones Roman had mentioned. Leerie planted himself on the ceiling, using his crossbows to gesture directly down at them.

And Roman saw.

Blake Belladonna and Sun Wukong saw that he saw.

So they shot out the lights.

What happened next was a cacophony. The aggregated Faunus were yelling and complaining. Above it all, Roman screamed “DON’T LET THEM GET AWAY!” before the sounds of mechanisms revving.
Then, all of a sudden, a bright beacon of the evening-dusk outside gleaming through an enormous hole in the wall.

Leerie and Neo converged before the new egress. “What happened?” Leerie asked. “Where’d they go?”

Neo pointed out the hole. Leerie could now see the Paladin hurrying offsite at top speed. The hole had been the result of it crashing directly through the wall.

“They got the PALADIN?” Leerie cried.

Neo shook her head.

“…Oh, no. That’s worse and you know it.”

In a race to catch up with their headstrong friend, Neo and Leerie boarded their airship of choice, tracking the Paladin from the sky. Roman had taken it down an overpass, barreling after two specks flitting through traffic.

“And I would be all FOR letting him have this,” Leerie seethed, “except we BOTH know that any minute now, he’s gonna eat – “

A sudden patch of white ice spread across the overpass, and the Paladin slipped on it and fell right overboard.

Neo waved her finger between Leerie’s eyes and her own: we saw that coming.

It took them a while to steer the ship into the underpass without damaging it or any of the roadways. Once they chose a decent place to hover, Leerie clapped Neo on the back lightly; “Do your thing, babe.”

Neo fired him a wink before diving into the fray.

She waited for Roman to be out of any other hope. The Paladin was destroyed (again, she’d seen it coming, and so had Leerie). Leerie watched from above as she deflected a fiery energy from the newest blonde nuisance, then, after Roman gave a parting shot of dialogue, shifting the scene to make it look as if the pair was still standing there while the real deal booked it.

Leerie lowered the ship; they boarded just as the illusion was shattered behind him.

“Real bright, Bowler Hat!” Leerie jeered.

“JUST get us out of here!” Roman barked.

The ship blazed up into the air, and Roman and Neo gave Team RWBY a farewell glance to let them know they’d gotten away with it.

“Flawless escape, Torchwick,” Leerie went on. “A plus and a scholarship to a good college.”

“And I was supposed to do WHAT instead?”

Neo gestured.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘LITERALLY ANYTHING BUT THAT’?”
“Give it up, Li’l Ice Cream,” Leerie sighed. “The more I think on it, the more I realize how things really work around here. Bowler Hat is just a baby. A little baby bad guy. And we’re his stressed-out parents who can’t take their eyes off him for a second.”

“HEY!”

Neo took her place beside Leerie in the cockpit, nodding assent to his statement.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here! I almost had them, and you know it!”

Leerie was getting better at pantomime, and even a little sign language. He reverted to this to talk to Neo while Roman kept ranting.

“How was I supposed to know Blondie had a Semblance like that? Any NORMAL kid would be dead, and – are you two listening to me? Are you two IGNORING me? Awww, come onnnn!”

The ship made for home.

At the Crow Bar, the trio gathered to discuss the next move.

“You know the plan,” Roman sighed. “I know the plan. I go you-know-where, I activate you-know-what, and it all goes to shit. So why do I have this feeling like it’s gonna blow up in my face? Oh, wait, that’s right. Because you two keep insisting everything always does.”

“Not everything,” Leerie corrected. “Just when you hijack unfinished Atlesian military technology for a car chase. Which you should really see the problem with.”

Roman stirred the ice in his drink with a spoon, letting it click-clack against the glass’ outer rim. “Not gonna lie, Sparkles. Kinda wish you were comin’ with us on this one.”

“You know how Salem would feel about that,” Leerie sighed. “She wants you to prove your stuff this time. Make sure you’re a good investment WITHOUT me hanging over your shoulder.”

“I know, I know.”

“And besides…I’ve got my own stuff goin’ on.”

“You have a life outside of us? You’re shitting me.”

Neo looked to Leerie, signing four letters: D-E-R-T.

“Just personal stuff,” Leerie told Roman as he nodded to Neo.

Neo smiled.

“All right,” Roman said with a nod. “Don’t ask, don’t tell. I get how it works.”

“Bowler Hat, nobody within ten feet of you needs to ASK.”

“You did. The first day. And broke rule number four.”

“Rule number four said I could ask once!” Leerie argued.
“Anyway.” Roman lifted the spoon from the glass, licking the bitter liquor from its curve. “This is probably the last drinking-and-bitching session we’re gonna have for a month or so, so let’s make the most of it.”

“Toast?” Leerie suggested.

“Why the hell not?” Roman raised his glass. “To Mountain Glenn!”

Neo and Leerie raised their own, and Leerie spoke for both of them: “To Mountain Glenn!”

“To Mountain Glenn!” the overly invested bartender cried as he held up his own glass.

“NOT YOU!” Roman yelled so sharply, the bartender dropped the glass and spilled vodka on his own foot.

“Gee darn it…”

“After this,” Roman said before downing his drink, “I think I’m gonna take about a month off. We could use a goddamn rest, don’t you think?”

Leerie didn’t approach Team DERT directly. He caught them on their field mission for school, watching them dispatch a pack of Grimm in the outer reaches.

“TOOOOPAAAAAZ THEEEEEE BOOOOOOMB!” Topaz bellowed as he dropped onto an Ursa from above, ripping it into crossways with his swords and then tearing its flesh apart by yanking the hooks different directions.

“Hmph.” Eminence sneered. “If you wanna do it the pleeb way. Now, if you wanna do it the SEXY way…” He spun his staff to every angle, letting off more Aura beams from it as though casting a complex spell.

“Ras!” Dawn yelled. “Gimme battle theme #32!”

Raspberry kept squeezing her wrist-bow’s trigger with her thumb while her fingers fumbled with a music-playing device mounted on the underside of the cuff. “Sound board! Check!”

As a frantic boss theme from some game or another sounded across the field, Dawn yelled “Now that’s more LIKE it!” and hurled their hat-disc.

From his vantage point, Leerie smiled.

Once the Grimm were culled, Dawn gave the next command, and Raspberry blared a victory fanfare. All four of them struck dramatic yet very silly poses.

They were the ones, Leerie knew. It was just a matter of getting on their side now.

He returned to the warehouse to find Neo there alone.

“You’re back early,” he noted. “Where’s Bowler Hat?”

Neo turned to show him her eyes, the skin around them red from sobbing.

That was how Leerie knew.
After a couple days of milling about the warehouse, Leerie realized he needed to take charge. Roman might have been in government custody, but that didn’t have to be a permanent state. As for Neo, she was lost without him, even though she had Leerie. That was to be expected. Leerie might be her boyfriend, but Roman had been her family. Her Master of Masters.

But you couldn’t just sulk and wait for the Master to come back. You had to do something about it. And you had to make your own way without him.

That was where friends – or boyfriends – came in handy.

“I got a little recipe for success to help ya take your mind off things,” Leerie told Neo. “First step, follow me.”

He’d laid out as many blankets as he could find in the side room’s couch, fluffing up a ziggurat of pillows. “Now, you just lie down and take a little rest,” Leerie encouraged. “I’ll wake you up when it’s time for the surprise.”

Neo cocked her head.

“Well, if I gave you a hint, it wouldn’t be a surprise!” Leerie reminded her. “But go on. The extra rest’ll make things feel more chill.”

She snuggled in; he kissed her on the cheek. She found it easier than expected to drift away once her eyes were shut; since Roman had been taken, she had just become so weary.

Neo was awakened two hours later by the harsh clanging of two frying pans. With a sigh, she pulled herself out of the blanket nest, dragging her feet into the main room.

As soon as Leerie saw her, he increased the speed of the clanging, breaking into a dance. With a wicked grin, he belted out, “HAPPY-HAPPY BIRTHDAY, FROM ALL OF US TO YOU! WE WISH IT WAS OUR BIRTHDAY, SO WE COULD PARTY TOO!”

Neo let him know that it was not, in fact, her birthday.

Leerie lowered the pans. “It is now,” he told her with a grin. “Turn around to see your present.”

Neo did so, and at first, she’d thought that Leerie had set fire to the table. It turned out to instead be an inappropriately large amount of birthday candles jammed into the ugliest cake Neo had ever seen. It appeared to be an uneven brick of chocolate dough, barely baked all the way through and slathered in creams both black and white with no particular pattern. Next to it stood a carton of Neapolitan ice cream.

Neo began to chuckle silently.

“Whaaaaat?” Leerie groaned. “Yeah, I know, it’s not the PRETTIEST cake, but it’s an old recipe, okay? And the coconut mousse was harder than I remembered. I almost went with an ice cream cake, but I get the feeling it’s more complicated than just slamming ice cream between two things of chocolate, and then I realized the candles would melt it straight out, so I went back to basics. …Really complicated basics. Hey, WHA – “

She’d hugged him, nearly tackled him. He could feel her shudder. She was crying into him. He gently wrapped one arm around her, then used his free hand to run through her hair.

“Look, I tried, okay?” he sighed softly. “We’re gonna get him back, but we gotta play
Salem’s game first. This is the best I could do for now.”

Neo pulled away, quickly gesturing to let him know that she wasn’t crying because of the inadequacy. She was crying because he’d tried so hard. Because he was wonderful. And she was the happiest she’d been in days.

“Now, that’s more like it.” Leerie grinned. “What, you think I made that cake so you wouldn’t get sick from eating way too much of it? Go dig in!”

He knew exactly what wish she made as she blew out the small bonfire.

As they dined on dessert and naught else, Leerie remarked, “Heh. You’re the butcher, and I’m the baker. And we’re gonna get our Roman candlestick maker back. Just like old times.”

Neo nodded fervently.

“Oh, and speakin’ of the butcher... whaddaya say we finish off your birthday by a little encore performance of the Vale Rippers?”

Neo bounced up and down with glee.

She was so lucky to have him.

He was so lucky to have her.

“Aww, c’mon. Are you suuuuuure you don’t have a spot for me?” Leerie teased.

“You’re too old,” Emerald Sustrai scoffed.

She, Mercury Black, and Cinder Fall had shown up dressed in Beacon school uniforms, ready for the infiltration that would replace the train breach that had launched too early. (Leerie didn’t want to say he’d seen that coming. He actually hadn’t, but he felt like he should’ve prepared better for it. He knew Roman.) Once the plan was explained to Neo, she had conjured up a uniform of her own, as well as some altered genetics: black pigtails, bottle-green eyes, a different facial structure, skin with less pallor. The idea of the pseudonym had come to her right away – she’d wanted to be an “N” name still, and if Leerie were a lamplighter and Roman the wick, she would be the darkness that required them both to be necessary: Nox Tenebra. “Noxie” as a nickname.

“That’s what the magic of makeup is for!” Leerie argued playfully. “Or I could just mooch off the illusion Li’l Ice Cream’s using to look seventeen again. You know I wouldn’t be away from her long enough for it to wear off.”

“A team is four,” Mercury snapped. “There’s no room for you. We’ve got it all worked out.” He pointed to each of his teammates in turn. “C-M-N-E. Carmine.”

“Really?” Leerie was now in a very mischievous mood. “See, I think you should actually go Cinder, Merc, Emmy, Noxie. That way, you’d be team ‘C – ‘”

“NO,” Cinder growled.

Neo was already chuckling.

“All right, I get it,” Leerie relented. “You go have fun. But the minute it starts hitting the fan, I’m there in the fray.”

Neo replied with a thumbs-up.
Leerie approached her, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. “Go get him.”

As Team CMNE turned to leave, Leerie called out, “Wait. Noxie.”

Neo turned.

“When you get back…there’s some stuff I’d like to tell ya. Think of that as an incentive, got it?”

Neo nodded, then hurried off after her new teammates.

It had been a difficult decision, but he knew it had to end that way. She had to know. He adored her, maybe even really loved her, and that had never happened before. He had until the fall of Beacon to rehearse the speech. About Daybreak, about Luxu, about the reincarnations, the Keyblade War, the Master, everything.

As for Team DERT? If they survived the fall, that would be the ultimate proof that they were ready.

What Cinder had unleashed was Hell.

Grimm coursed through the streets like rivers and blanketed the dark skies like storm clouds. Vale Kingdom was crumbling from the inside out. The bodies of the dead carpeted the alleyways in numbers that made the Vale Rippers’ work look paltry, lying among the gears of crushed weapons. Up above, in Atlesian prison airship Blue-2, Neo had staged a prison break, and it was undoubtedly Roman Torchwick at the helm of the ship, gunning down every other Atlesian aircraft in sight.

Of course, it was all going on film. As was the sudden hijack of the Atlesian cyber-patrolmen to turn them to Cinder’s side, attacking the people instead of the Grimm. The perfect frame-up job for an entire kingdom.

Amidst it all, Leerie was doing whatever he could to ruin things further, gunning down innocents and stirring up the Grimm. He even let No Name assume its true form so he could unleash some real magic on this kingdom, with its ideas of Maidens centered around a single specialty each. Now Vale burned bright with Firaga.

He couldn’t help but think of all the people of days past who would be proud. Kefka. Airy. Jevil - chaos, chaos! Maybe Kokichi, depending on what he’d been lying about.

“You! STOP!”

“You’re gonna cut that out RIGHT NOW, pal – “

As the two warriors skidded around the corner to face the source of the destruction, only one realized who he was looking at, his jaw dropping. “Leerie?”

Oh, now this was too good. Leerie chuckled. “Qrow Branwen,” he remarked. “Haven’t seen you in a hot minute. Not that I really wanted to.”

“You know this delinquent?” Qrow’s more muscular, more cybernetic companion James Ironwood asked.

“Used to be classmates.” Qrow drew back his scythe. “He made an ass outta my sister in
practical exams. Never really forgave him for that.”

“And you annoyed me every day of term,” Leerie countered. “You were unforgiven long before I was.”

“Looks like we get to settle the score,” Qrow stated.

“Ready or not.” Leerie swiped both crossbows away from his body in an X motion. “HERE I COME!”

He whirled and blasted, slicing at Qrow and shooting at Ironwood, deflecting the latter’s gun while ducking and jumping over the former’s scythe. Metal hit metal, sparking. Bullets rocketed through the night.

Unfortunately, Leerie never had figured out Qrow’s Semblance. Therefore, he thought all he needed was skill. That he couldn’t possibly slip. That luck played no factor.

He was proven wrong when he felt the chomp of a small dog’s jaws on his Achilles tendon.

Whirling about, Leerie left Qrow forgotten for the moment, kicking at the small gray Corgi that had just sank its teeth into him. “BAD DOG! VERY BAD DOG!”

Qrow’s scythe slicked. Metal hit flesh instead of metal.

One of his arms – the left one – had been severed from the elbow down, its yellow-studded bracelet sparkling in the moonlight as it flopped to the cobblestone. Angrily, Leerie cast a Curaga to heal over the wound, preventing himself from bleeding out, and kicked the fallen bow up to his knee, where he bounced it to its partner, defaulting to the missile launcher.

“You’re gonna pay for that, Scythe Boy,” he growled.

He fired once. Ironwood intercepted it, backhanding it with his metal wrist. A nearby shop had a hole torn through its façade. Leerie fired twice. Qrow and Ironwood both scattered out of the trajectory; he hadn’t really decided which one he was aiming at, and so ended up making a wild shot. The third time, he was set up not to miss.

However, that was when it became all the more unfortunate that he didn’t know what Qrow’s Semblance was.

An entire airship came crashing down into the building behind him, causing an avalanche of metal, stone, and glass to rain down on him in what would have been deadly force.

He blinked himself up through it, a series of teleportations flinging him up through the rubble, through the chambers of the offending airship, out the back of the now-flaming vehicle, which had a large winged Grimm draped over it. From there, he hid.

“Whoa,” Qrow remarked, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. “Didn’t know I could pull it off that bad.”

“I’m sorry,” Ironwood said sympathetically.

“Don’t be.” Qrow turned to shrug it off. “He was a jerkass anyway. C’mon, Zwei.”

The Corgi followed, yipping obediently.

They left, believing him dead. That was fine by Leerie. After nearly having a building fall
on his now one-armed body, he figured it was probably time to call it quits. He made a mental note to give Roman a hard time later for gunning down the ship that had caused the collapse on top of him.

But something was wrong. A presence atop his head that signified certain doom. He reached up to touch the harbinger, and his stomach lost its bottom.

If this was one of the ships that had fallen victim to Roman’s rapid fire, then how had Leerie come out of that ship wearing Roman’s hat?

He could now see the inscription on the ship’s hull more clearly. “Blue-2.”

“BLIZZAZA!”

The high-level ice spell had nearly drained all of Leerie’s energy in one go; he stumbled into the ship as if drunk. The fire was out, though, leaving a cool coating of soft blue over everything and allowing him to explore. He mustered the energy to port from room to room, finding nothing but the bodies of the crewmen. It was definitely Roman’s holding ship, though. The cells were proof. And as Leerie popped onto the deck, next to the dead Grimm, he found his foot upon the cracked screen of Roman’s scroll, with a photo of Leerie, Neo, and Roman himself as the lockscreen.

But if the trappings were here, and Roman not, that meant he’d escaped the crash unscathed, right? That was the only possibility –

Unless.

No Name shimmered. “Please don’t be in the bird,” Leerie muttered. “Please don’t be in the bird.”

He made one great incision across the belly of the beast, and his stomach turned when Melodic Cudgel clanged out.

Leerie dove into the gore, going through sensations he dared not take too much stock of in order to find his quarry. His arms locked around a second human body, pulling it from the mire and getting it out into the open. From there, he could assess the damage.

Roman had been badly burned, by fire and acid alike. One of his arms was eaten through to the bone, and he’d lost a lot of blood from there and other apertures. His mascara was marred, as were the spots on his face that had been ravaged by the acid. The eye normally covered by hair seemed to have been digested right out of the socket.

“No,” Leerie muttered as he clutched the limp body. “No, no, NO…”

He’d taught himself, after Asriel, how not to cry. The trick was seeing enough tragedy. When you witnessed enough things that were nothing short of messed up, you became desensitized. You could watch your closest loved one flayed before you and never shed a tear.

That didn’t mean the internal hurt was any less. Just that it didn’t show.

Then, the smallest hope. Roman stirred, gave an “Eh” of breath.

“Bowler!” Leerie gasped. “Thought you were a goner there – “

Roman convulsed, hacked. Blood spat from his mouth onto his chest.
“I…kinda am,” he said weakly. “Fucking hell. This is it, huh?”

No. Not Leerie’s best friend. The only thing worse would be if –

“Neo,” Leerie said sharply. “Where’s Neo?”

“Neo…”

“WHERE IS SHE?”

“Gone,” Roman choked, rivulets of blood running down from his nostrils. “She’s… gone…”

“WHAT?” Leerie was now shaking Roman violently. “WHERE? GONE WHERE?”

“Sh…she…”

Another cough. More blood. And then motionless silence.

It took Leerie several minutes to realize he even still existed in this hellscape. His friend lay dead in his arms. His girlfriend, by Roman’s word, was dead as well, and he hadn’t even been able to see her off. He hadn’t even gotten to tell her the truth. He hadn’t done a lot of things.

There was really no point in working for Salem anymore, was there?

When Leerie’s head cleared, he vanished, reappearing in the fields outside Vale. The kingdom now resembled Pandemonium, a conflagration of destruction studded with the writhing of the swarms of Grimm. Here, on the unspoiled earth, in the only safe haven left, Leerie lay Roman’s ravaged body down.

“You were right,” he said with a forced laugh. “You could use a rest.”

Then he collapsed, finally spent from using up so much magical energy. It would have appeared, from above, to be two friends sleeping casually beside each other, albeit one of them a little worse for wear physically, to say the least. But only one was dreaming, breathing, heart still beating.

Meanwhile, at the kingdom’s heart, Neo’s parasol had finally caught a fortunate wind. She floated gracefully to the street, where her feet and mind alike began to race. She had to find Leerie. She had to find a way to get back up to Roman. She had to fight this incredible sense of dread building within her.

She tripped on stray rubble. Faceplanted at the side of the debris that had been the building knocked down. Found her head turned to face Leerie’s disembodied arm, instantly recognizable by its sparkling yellow gems, at the edge of the destruction.

Neo sat up like a bolt, pulling the arm into her grasp. It couldn’t be. No, he couldn’t be dead. But what else could she think, finding a piece of him near this destruction?

Acceptance that he was buried beneath the rubble hit her all too soon.

Then, from above, a black curve of fabric fluttered down, caught on similar winds that had taken her for a joyride. Slightly singed, Roman’s hat landed atop Leerie’s lost limb.

Neo was alone.

She let out a soundless scream.
Never again was she to cross the path of the man named Leerie Libidine on that world.

When the dust had settled, four youths found themselves surveying the wreckage from atop the roof of a Dust shop.

“Where do we go now?” Raspberry asked. “What do we do?”

“I DON’T KNOW!” Dawn cried, practically having a meltdown. “THERE’S TOO MUCH FREEDOM! THE WORLD’S TOO BIG! WE COULD GO ANYWHERE!”

“Okay, calm down, Dawn!” Eminence attempted. “We just have to make a plan. We can make a plan. I will help you make a plan.”

“PLAN? WHAT PLAN? BEACON FUCKING EXPLODED!”

“I mean…there are always backup plans,” Topaz suggested. “I actually had a couple ideas for monetized video essays. Or we could be professional fight analysts. Or…wait for it…vigilante superheroes.”

“How the hell are we supposed to become vigilante superheroes?” Raspberry asked.

“You wanted a plan,” Topaz replied. “I just gave you three plans.”

“AND THEY ALL SUCK!” Dawn cried.

“I think…we have to just go home.” Raspberry hung her head. “I’m gonna miss this place, but…there’s nothing LEFT of it.”

“Ooooooor you could take the other option.”

When Leerie’s voice cut through, the others rounded on him, weapons drawn. “YOU,” Dawn growled. “YOU WERE THE ONE WHO EXPLODED BEACON, WEREN’T YOU?”

“Me?” Leerie played innocent. “I was just a bystander. As surprised by you as anyone else. I just came to offer you a way to rise from the ashes. See, I remember you four, and you’ve got spunk. You’ve got POTENTIAL. If you don’t wanna quit studying, then don’t. You’d just have to transfer to Weird Uncle Leerie Libidine’s Private School of Magic and Mystery.”

“This sounds like a human trafficking ring,” Raspberry said flatly.

Leerie rolled his eyes. “I’m on the up-and-up, okay? I wanna keep training you four to become masters. Just not the regular kind.”

“Are you trying to seduce us to the dark side?” Eminence asked.

“Well, you’re gonna have to get your hands a little dirty,” Leerie told them. “I wouldn’t use the word ‘seduce,’ especially around you, Wizard. But didn’t you wanna live the wild life? Wasn’t Roman Torchwick ‘goals’? Aren’t you tired of being nice? Don’t you just wanna go bananas? The whole kingdom already did without you.”

“I mean, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to just give up and solve all my problems by turning into a supervillain,” Raspberry admitted.

“That has been my goal from day one,” Eminence stated flatly.
“There is always the question of if we were even heroes in the first place,” Topaz mused, “or just weapons pointed at the enemy so someone else could claim the victory.”

“. . .Let’s hear your terms,” Dawn decided.

“We travel to Argus,” Leerie suggested. “That way, we’re close enough to Atlas that I can get this arm fixed. See? I got hurt, too. Would I have started something that would end in my arm getting hacked off? Or do you not care at this point?”

“This is starting to sound like a plan,” Dawn admitted, “which is way better than no plan.”

“Anyway,” Leerie went on, “I keep training you kids in your fighting skills. Maybe teach you a few tricks you think are reserved for the Maidens. Make you into masters that could more than handle another kingdom falling. Maybe even stop the next one from happening. But first things first, any of you know what this is?”

He called No Name to his one good hand.

“A huge-ass key?” Eminence guessed.

“These combo weapons just keep getting weirder and weirder,” Topaz mused.

“It aesthetically pleases me,” Raspberry said contentedly. “I actually want one.”

“You would, ripoff artist,” Leerie grunted. “First my crossbows, and now this.”

“HEY!”

“Is it also a gun?” Dawn asked.

At that, Leerie laughed long and loud. “Oh, it is SO much more than a gun! And you four are the Ultimate Lucky Students who get to learn all about what it can do for ya. So. You in?”

“Better than going back home and falling into the biggest depression spell of my life,” Raspberry decided.

“Well, NOW I have to go JUST so I know what the key does,” Topaz growled.

“We’re still gonna get to cause our own mayhem, right?” Eminence asked. “Just making sure.”

“We’re on board,” Dawn affirmed. “But the minute things get spoopy, we’re out.”

“Hey, no...spoopiness here,” Leerie reassured. “Mayhem? Now, that, we can have fun with. So, let’s get acquainted. I’m Leerie Libidine, but I told you that already. Names?”

They fired in rapid succession:

“Dawn Sebastian.”

“Eminence Le Fay.”

“Raspberry Auryn!”

“And I’m Topaz Fossil.”
“Good start…” Leerie mused. “But actually, for this, I’m gonna need you all to put a ‘der’ in front of those last names. It’s kind of an honorific.”

“Eminence DER Le Fay?” Eminence snorted. “You realize that would make my last name mean ‘the the fair.’”

It was “the fairy,” actually, but Leerie didn’t correct him. “Well, you’re so good-looking, people have to say the ‘the’ part twice.”

Eminence shrugged. “Can’t argue with that.”

“Anyway…” Leerie dismissed No Name, removing four slips of paper from his pockets. “Next train to Argus in an hour. If you gotta use the can, use it now.”

Team DERT eventually became versed in the Keyblade, connecting Remnant tenuously to the greater network of worlds. They traveled back and forth, having many misadventures and growing old along the way. They took their own apprentices, introducing youths from Remnant into the lifestyle of the Keyblade. Those youths partnered up with mates from other worlds, and their offspring found themselves of two realms and eventually more as time went on.

That was how No Name found itself in the hands of a boy with genes from Remnant. Rare genes, at that. A silver-eyed warrior named Xehanort, who had yet to learn that he was willing to sacrifice his own ability to destroy the Darkness in exchange for control over it.
Braig and Xigbar

After passing on No Name, he found himself biding his time over the next series of lives. Not much to do but await the Keyblade War, and assist in the Darkness where he could.

Though he’d struck a great blow with the Dark Fountains. He could feel it. Even though he’d lived out a timeline with no Knight Asriel, his inner sense of the balance could feel the eruption of the extra fountain from the other timeline, unguarded by the ring of Luxendarc's that had once secured the Light. If any Luxendorcs still remained, it certainly wasn’t enough of them to do their job.

When he finally came upon Xehanort, he knew he had succeeded in his mission. Now called “Braig,” he gave no sense that he was so much older than Xehanort, that Xehanort’s master had been a result of his tutelage. Xehanort merely thought he was recruiting another pawn who was hungry to succeed No Name, not inciting the end of the cycle.

It was worrisome that the man was gathering up a pure Light and a pure Darkness to forge the x-blade ahead of schedule, but Braig felt that the Master would have accounted for that in the grand plan. Surely the Book of Prophecies had mentioned it. And if all else failed, he could always tag along to the Keyblade Graveyard and make sure just enough went wrong for a Pyrrhic victory.

He had no Key of his own now. He’d gravitated to rapid-fire crossbows, almost guns. Wondered if he should upgrade to an actual gun, but that wasn’t the style of Radiant Garden. Gunblades seemed to exist here, but not guns.

Strange. So many people in Radiant Garden were facsimiles of those he had met in the other worldlines. There was a Squall Leonhart, just a child. There was a similarly-aged Cloud Strife. Neither had any idea of Shinryu’s gathering, or of the fact that in another life, they had grown up on different worlds from each other entirely.

It made Braig hold out hope, for a time, that there would be an Emet-Selch here, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Not a Kefka, a Gilgamesh, or a Kuja as a consolation prize, either. Turned out there was a Sephiroth, but that wasn’t his style.

He devoted his time to Xehanort and his plans. This was going to be his last go-around, and he knew it. However, this was when old words finally caught up with him. Seam’s words, to be exact.

It turned out when you turned a blind eye, the universe really did decide you didn’t need it anymore.

Sporting a patch and a new scar, Braig joined Xehanort on the battlefield and assisted him into a younger vessel. Like he’d failed to do with Hajime Hinata. (How’d that ever turn out, anyway? He supposed he would never know.) The problem was that thanks to the intervention of a certain tough-as-nails master, the resulting amalgamation, the Terranort, had lost all of his memories.

Or so Braig thought.

He convinced Ansem to let the youth stay in the castle and join the staff. And for a time, there was an expectant peace, the calm before the storm.

A cruel facsimile of the friends Braig had known in Daybreak Town. Five there, five here.
But not at all the same.

“Yo, Aeleus!” he called as he strode into the guards’ chamber. “What say you the two of us tear up the town? Major shopping spree? Maybe a little five-finger discount, if you’re not a coward. C’mon, there’s gotta be some bangle or bauble out there you want!”

Aeleus simply left the room without saying a word.

“Geez. Seriously?”

Once, Braig had commandeered a lounge, making himself a blanket nest with sufficient pillows for a long, long nap. That nap’s actual runtime was three minutes before a pair of strong hands caught him by the shoulders, wrenched him off the couch, and hurled him to the ground.

“NO BREAKS!” Dilan roared as he watched Braig scramble to escape.

And if there was one person you didn’t want to listen to the vents of when he was envious…

“My experiments, defunded?” Even raged, pacing back and forth across the laboratory in a snit. “MINE? I am the only COMPETENT person in this castle! My research has furthered EVERYONE’S progress here! Ansem would be nowhere NEAR where he is WITHOUT ME! He DARES to declare my project ‘dangerous’? We’ll see how he feels without me to clean up after him! I won’t lift a FINGER until he apologizes and reimburses me for what I have lost!”

Braig had left the room then, and Even hadn’t even noticed, continuing to yell at the wall.

As tiny Ienzo roamed the halls of the castle, sea-salt ice cream in hand, he passed Braig with a plastic airtight tub. “Hey, kiddo,” Braig greeted. “You’re always eatin’ that salty stuff. Ever thought about branchin’ out? Here. Got a treat for ya.”

He opened the tub to reveal a piece of his ugly yet delicious chocolate-coconut cake.

Ienzo shook his head fervently and made an about-face, nearly jogging away.

“…Yeah, okay, I can see how that came off as sketchy,” Braig admitted.

Finally, he and Xehanort sparred often in the courtyard, bows versus blade. Braig praised Xehanort on his progress, congratulating him on his proficiency, joking that soon, student would become master. But unlike with Ira, there was no heart here. Only cold ambition leading toward a sinister goal, set in stone. This was no game, unless you wanted to consider it another move in the great chess.

It all came to a crashing halt when Xehanort turned on the rest. Braig realized how he’d been manipulated. What a twist that was – Braig, who was Luxu, who was Luciant and Lustre and Myst and Izuru and Leerie and countless others, being the pawn at the end of the day. At least that was subject to change. And it did so quickly.

The act of dying and being reborn wasn’t alien to Braig. What felt peculiar was dying and being reborn as the same person. True, he had no heart (though he could see a mile away that Xehanort had planted the seed of his own inside of him). True, Xehanort’s Nobody, Xemnas, who spent more time sitting on his behind and waxing philosophical than actually doing anything productive, had re-labeled the can “Xigbar.” But the contents were the same.

Xemnas told a lie. If his subordinates – the apprentices, two other boys from Radiant
Garden, and a few faces Xigbar found startlingly familiar – could collect enough hearts, they would be able to summon Kingdom Hearts itself. For what purpose? Gaining hearts of their own, he claimed. That was the lie. Xigbar knew exactly what would happen if Kingdom Hearts turned up, and it wasn’t going to be the grand return of their capacity for emotion and empathy.

Though his companions were almost better off in that state. It was amazing, what people would do once told they were no longer capable of harboring a moral compass. That wasn’t even true. Emotions weren’t what made you a good person. But if given the excuse, they would turn cold, scheme and schmooze, beat and batter. Finally able to strike at innocents with six times the original arsenal and relish it. Finally able to unleash pyromania that would make Roman Torchwick amazed. Finally able to be Vexen with approximately fifty percent fewer people yelling at you for being Vexen. Now, this was almost a crowd Xigbar could see himself running with.

If it weren’t for the fact that Xemnas was so dead boring, he found himself sneaking gossip magazines into the base. And the fact that a few of the neophytes seemed to think he had a crush on Demyx for some reason.

They were dispatched to new worlds, within reach of their World That Never Was Yet Somehow Managed to Be. There, the mission was simple: destroy Heartless. Collect hearts. Rebuild the Kingdom.

Though it seemed Xemnas still harbored some resentment toward Braig for trying to steer his destiny in Radiant Garden when he was playing the part of the amnesiac. This came in the form of Xigbar being sent to one world and only one world. A world he soon got sick of.

Well, he could teach Xemnas his lesson in that regard.

 Granted, it was a very large world. He’d heard of one called “Deep Space” that was made up of a series of planets, and this one was similar. Yet it didn’t have enough planets to really hold Xigbar’s attention.

What it did have, which was nice, was a moonbase where a fellow thug and thrillseeker lived beneath a glass dome open to the black and starry sky. Xigbar found him here, relaxing poolside, his bare blue chest and cybernetic arm exposed. A host of women strode here and there doing his bidding, all wanting a piece of his blood money.

“Yo, Darkmatter!” Xigbar unzipped his coat, then removed his shirt, lying down in only his leather pants in the deck chair next to the cyborg. “How’s it been?”

“Can’t complain,” Warp Darkmatter replied. “Recently hijacked a supply ship of really, REALLY valuable crystals. And now I’m having my game room remodeled from the profit. Even got to take a couple guys out, and I don’t mean for dinner and a movie.”

“Aww, and you didn’t invite me?”

“I keep telling you, give me your actual number and I can get you in on this stuff!”

“No can do, Darkmatter. I’m like a solar wind. I come and go when you least expect it. Can’t change that. I follow my own rules.”

“And that’s why we get along.” Warp passed him a doughy disc. “Bagel?”

“You know it.” Xigbar took it into hand, only asking “What kind?” after accepting. Like it really made a difference.
“Bunzel.”
“Love it.”
“So what brings you around today, Bagel Boy?”
“Eh.” Xigbar shrugged, a mouth full of bunzel bagel. “Just wanted to catch some moonbeams.”
“Fair.”

They chatted a while, mostly about Warp’s various hits and hijacks. The women came by to massage moontan lotion into their skin. Xigbar shut his remaining eye, imagining the hands belonged to a woman long dead, generations past, with kaleidoscope eyes and an insatiable bloodlust.

All the while, Xigbar kept an eye on the time. When it came due, he gave a morose sigh.

“Truth be told, buddy, I came here for a little more than just the poolside banter and bagels,” he said as he rose, gathering his discarded clothing. “Actually popped ‘round to say goodbye. This is gonna be my last mission in the Galactic Alliance.”

“Get out.”

“I’m gonna. That’s what I’m tryin’ to tell ya.”

“So what gives?” Warp asked, sitting up to get a better look at Xigbar. “You find a better gig in the next galaxy or somethin’?”

“Not really,” Xigbar admitted. He turned to face Warp directly, zipping up his coat. “Y’know that feeling you get when you have this place you visit so many times, you’ve practically got it memorized?”

“Is this leading up to some sappy sentiment about home being where the heart is?”

“Nah,” Xigbar replied. “It’s about seeing the same scenery so many times you get sick of it. Real sick of it. Like you wouldn’t mind if it just…up and disappeared one day. Y’know, I finally understand how the old coot must’ve felt on his little island, looking out at the great big sea.”

“You stopped making sense about three sentences ago.”

“The Alliance is like that,” Xigbar told Warp. “From the depths of Bathyos to the wilds of Karn, I’m just…DONE. If I never see any of this place again, it’ll be too soon. The only thing I ever really cared about here was you. That’s why I came to give you an advance warning and a way out.”


Xigbar grinned.

The core exploded.

The Seeker of Darkness wasn’t the only one who could destroy worlds by connecting their hearts to the Darkness. Xigbar had found a way. Being one of the original Masters had its perks, after all. He’d set up the heart to detonate after a set amount of time. Now, Darkness was spreading
throughout the Alliance, consuming all it touched, a wriggling wave of squirming Pureblood Heartless scooping up the scraps for snacks.

“What IS THAT?” Warp yelled, standing up and pointing at the incoming wave of abyss.

“It’s been fun,” Xigbar told Warp. “But we’re done. Goodbye.”

He cast a Corridor of Darkness behind Warp, its other end emptying into a far-off world where he knew Warp would have fun wreaking havoc at least. Then he gave Warp a sharp kick in the pectorals, sending him stumbling back. The Corridor closed, protecting the cyborg from the imminent apocalypse.

“This world has been connected,” Xigbar said in a grave tone. “Heh. Always wanted to say that. Let’s see Mr. Monologue try to dispatch me to the Void.”

He RTC’d, and the Alliance was swallowed.

Xemnas then learned his lesson about diversifying Xigbar’s assignments.

In truth, Xigbar had some fun. Xaldin was obsessed with patrolling the Beast’s castle, taking notes on every move the monster made. Well, he could do him. Xigbar actually spent time exploring the surrounding countryside, gunning down Heartless like Xaldin was supposed to be doing in the first place instead of being myopic.

“Wanna tell me ‘no breaks’ now?” he muttered, shooting down a Bully Dog with his guns. Yes. Guns. Actual guns. He’d traded up. Though the ammo still resembled arrows. He had to remember his roots.

Like it was anything but busy work anyway. The Bully Dog’s heart would just reform somewhere else. This was a game to keep the pawns occupied while Xemnas sought his Keybearing king and queen. One male glass cannon and one all-powerful female warrior; may the best Keybearer win.

But he was getting assignments to varied worlds now, so he knew better than to complain.

Strolling into town, Xigbar dissipated his guns. The sleepy provincial village was devoid of any supernatural evils. Now, that was a disappointment. There had to be some Darkness somewhere in this disgustingly cute establishment.

Luckily, there was a tavern. And where there was alcohol, there were bad decisions being made.

He ordered a pint, and silently toasted Roman Torchwick before taking a drink. Xigbar was much better at holding his liquor than Leerie had been. His ears – now pointed, but not Elezen, unfortunately – perked up to hear the conversations taking place throughout the tavern.

“And that’s when I shot that beauty up there, proving that truly, there is no better marksman in all of France than I!”

“Yeah, you sure got that right! Nobody shoots like you!”

Well, that conversation was practically an open invitation. Xigbar strode over to the pair of men who were regaling the pubgoers with their tales of slaughter of beast – a tall, broad Adonis in crimson and his short, squat sidekick with far too much wide-eyed innocence to actually put up
with this long-term yet enough loyalty to not realize that part.

“So you’re this town’s Ultimate Marksman, eh?” Xigbar addressed. “I mean, sure, you’re a hunk, but you gotta be second best at best.”

There were gasps from throughout the pub. Xigbar had apparently committed a social taboo. He liked that.

“Such accusations!” The handsome man’s deep voice boomed in such a dramatic way, Xigbar couldn’t help but be amused. “Everyone knows that there’s no one better in all of France – nay, all the world than I! Take a look around this very tavern!”

Xigbar did so. “Okay. Done. What am I lookin’ at?”

“You see the myriad of antlers, collected by an expert hunter?”

“Okay. That is way too many antlers. But I see ‘em now.”

“Every single one of them came from one of my kills!” the man boasted. “Can you say that much?”

“Well, I don’t exactly keep trophies,” Xigbar admitted, “but my kill count is way higher than yours.”

“Put him to the test, Gaston!” the short man cried, swinging his fist. “Let’s have a contest! Right here! Right now!”

“A wondrous idea, Lefou!” Gaston slapped his smaller sidekick on the back so hard, the diminutive man went stumbling head over heels. “Tom! Dick! Stanley! Set up some targets!”

“Game on,” Xigbar said with a wicked grin.

A small bottle was set atop a stack of barrels at the far end of the pub; Gaston and Xigbar were situated at the other. Xigbar aimed first, twirling his guns dramatically before letting off a single snipe that shattered the bottle.

“That’s nothing!” Gaston pushed past him. “Watch how a REAL man does it!”

The bottle was replaced. Gaston’s shot hit it, all right. As well as the entire barrel, raining beer over the patrons who raised their glasses to catch the precipitation and get some free fare. It hardly counted if you just blew up the entire barrel, Xigbar thought, but either because the people here feared Gaston, respected Gaston, or just wanted free beer, they cheered him on and declared him the winner.

And, seeing that all-too-familiar smirk upon Gaston’s face, Xigbar was inspired to play along. “Well. You sure showed me.”

“That I did!” Gaston declared.

“Yeah, you tell ‘im!” Lefou cried. “You wanna hear all about the other things Gaston’s great at?”

“Sure,” Xigbar said with a shrug. “Humor me.”

To his surprise, Lefou burst into song: “Noooooo…oooooone’s…slick as Gaston! No one’s quick as Gaston! No one’s neck’s as incredibly thick as Gaston!”
Xigbar only grew more confused as the entire pub joined in. Then he realized what was going on here. Gaston’s ego was so large and fragile, this song was like an anthem. Everyone knew it, and everyone sang it to remind each other who was in charge around here. However, they didn’t seem afraid to do so. In fact, this musical number was cause for the entire tavern to go even more celebratory than before, dancing on tables, making up new harmonies, and passing around drink after drink.

By the end, Xigbar found himself rather tipsy, singing right along with Gaston himself, one arm around Gaston’s shoulders as Gaston had one beefy arm around his.

No way Xaldin was having this much fun snooping through the Beast’s sock drawer.

As it turned out, people seemed to like group musical numbers in a lot of the worlds Xigbar was assigned to. As he roamed the nighttime deserts, coming upon a certain abandoned well, he found himself humming a little song he’d heard on a completely different world. Being the musical sort himself, he began to ad-lib some of the lyrics: “This is Halloween, this is – Xemnas Day, Heartless spawn in the dead of night, Nobody man might catch you with a brand-new plan, talk really slowly, make you wanna take a nap – “

He’d finished reeling up the rope. There, in the pot used to draw the water, floated the object he’d been looking for: a jet-black fluted oil lamp.

“Score.” Xigbar plucked the lamp, then, quite dramatically, gave it a rub.

The night was filled with raucous laughter. Red smoke billowed around Xigbar, pluming higher into the night as if from a wildfire, then congealing into the form of a blood-crimson genie that towered several times Xigbar’s size in the air beside him.

The genie cut off his own laughter to proclaim, “I AM FREE! FREE TO EXACT VENGEANCE UPON HE WHO HAS IMPRISONED ME!”

“Wait for it,” Xigbar muttered.

The genie attempted to fly off into the horizon, only for his wrist-cuffs to glow and hold him back, pinning him within the designated radius of the onyx lamp. Then he attempted the opposite direction, with the same result.

“Looks like you’ve gone too far, Jafar!” Xigbar yelled up at him.

“WWWWHHHHAT?” The genie Jafar glared down at Xigbar. “YOU! YOU HOLD THE ACCURSED LAMP THAT BINDS ME IN ITS PLACE!”

“And you know what that means,” Xigbar said cockily. “Whoever you were gonna ix-nay, you can’t do it. Genie rules.”

“How Unfortunately True!” Jafar moaned. “I Cannot Kill That Accursed Aladdin…Unless I Have Someone Else Arrange It For Me…”

He gave Xigbar a meaningful look.

“Nope,” Xigbar replied coolly. “Not happenin’. See, I don’t think you get how this works. I found the lamp, and I’m not scared of you OR stupid, so you gotta do what I want. I get three wishes, remember? And maybe, Maybe, if the first two are good, I’ll let you off the hook and wish you free with the third one.”
Jafar clenched his teeth in anger.

“Also, could ya maybe tone it down a bit?” Xigbar asked. “Lemme put it in a way your ego will understand: your true form’s a bit too much for my limited mind.”

Jafar relented. In a condensing of smoke, he reforged himself as a human in shape, tall, imposing, elegant, clothed in red and black.


“Don’t think you can control me,” Jafar growled.

“Or what?” Xigbar teased. “You gonna kill me?”

“You’d be surprised what you can live through.”

“Actually, no. I wouldn’t. Trust me.”

Jafar’s brow furrowed. “Very well. Make your wishes. Then use the third to free me! The first two will be more than enough to your liking!”

“So you agree to do this the easy way!” Xigbar told him. “I like that. Okay. Wish number one. Actually the only one I’m required to make in the first place. I want you to just FLOOD this world with Heartless. Quintuple the current population.”

“Hmm…I rather like this wish,” Jafar realized. “It is my command!”

He clapped his hands. A bright red shockwave resonated out. In the distance, black silhouettes were seen rising against the desert sky, seeking hearts to attack.

“As for your second wish?” Jafar asked. “Might I interest you in the sultanate? Or ultimate sorcerous power?”

Xigbar shook his head. “This one’s a bit more…personal. A long time ago, and I mean a REAL long time ago, I knew this guy, called himself the Master of Masters. Ran a place called Daybreak Town. You could say I’m only the guy I am ‘cause of him. Well, he cut and run a long time ago. Now, he told me WHY he had to leave, but he never exactly said WHERE he was going. All I wanna know is where he is right now. Don’t bring me to him, or vice versa. If I upset the plan, he’ll kill me. I just wanna know. I’ve been in the dark enough.”

“That is all?” Jafar urged. “It seems a very small wish in comparison to what I could grant you.”

“I did say I’d consider freeing you if you gave me what I WANTED, didn’t I? I want THAT.”

Jafar rolled his eyes. “Consider it done.”

He casually pointed a finger, opening a scrying portal in midair: a view of another world entirely. And an all-too-familiar figure in the foreground.

Xigbar stared for a while, hardly able to even believe it. “So that’s where you’ve been the whole time,” he muttered. “Clever little sneak.”

“Are you finished?” Jafar sighed.
Xigbar could have watched the scene for an eternity. “Yeah. I got what I wanted.”

The portal dissipated. “Now,” Jafar said expectantly, “about that third wish…”

“Oh, yeah,” Xigbar replied. “For my third, I wish for your fffffffff…”

Jafar’s eyes widened.

Xigbar could barely keep from laughing. “ – ffffun company for the next twenty-four hours.”

“WHAT?” Jafar cried. “YOU PROMISED ME FREEDOM!”

“I promised you I’d CONSIDER it!” Xigbar reminded him, waggling a finger. “Look, I just need some actual entertainment in this lifetime. Darkmatter’s probably gonna sooner blast my head off than talk to me again, not that I don’t deserve that one, and Gaston’s not really the best-buddy type. Neither are you, but by genie rules, I can make you hang out with me, and you have to put up with it.”

“And what exactly constitutes this ‘hanging out’?” Jafar asked through gritted teeth.

“Now, this is the part I think you’re gonna like,” Xigbar told him. “I’m kinda into mayhem these days. Y’know, pyromania, shooting places up, drinking h – no, wait, they don’t do that in this land. Guess I’ll settle for pigging out on sugared dates. Now, the head honcho I work for told me Aladdin’s off-limits, but we can get creative, right? Al’s technically in charge of diplomatic relations through the whole Seven Deserts. You and I aren’t allowed to kill him, but if we make a big ol’ mess he’s gotta clean up, we can sure make his life a lot harder. Maybe even throw some mortal peril in there to test just how many jumps ahead he REALLY is.”

“Oh, I must admit this does sound enticing,” Jafar relented, smiling sweetly. “Perhaps there will be some value in this day after all.”

“I mean, you seem like a pyro kinda guy, or maybe that’s just because of the red motif.”

Jafar bowed, sweeping his cape around front. “Do lead the way, my good…oh, I don’t seem to have caught your name.”

“Don’t really think I’m s’posed to tell it to ya…but we’re pals now, at least for a day. You can keep a secret, right?”

“Indubitably.”

“Call me Xigbar. Lookin’ forward to this.”

“As am I, Xigbar.”

When twenty-four hours had run out, both Jafar and Xigbar had agreed it was quite a good day. Jafar didn’t even plot a loophole to torment Xigbar. After laying waste to the lands and envisioning what Aladdin would have to go through in order to set everything right, he felt it was worth it.

Some worlds were stranger than others. For instance, when Xigbar found himself wandering through a moist jungle trail, looking for Heartless.

He didn’t find any. What he did find was a thick red dotted line, as though someone had
marked a trail with an enormous magic marker on the earth itself. After a few paces, a second line swerved in to join it, this one made up of blue triangles.

“What the…”

Xigbar looked down and behind himself. His own footsteps were becoming bright purple arrows, shaped like his ammo.

“Might as well see where this goes,” he muttered.

So he warped ahead, bit by bit, until he was ahead of the two parties involved in the chase. As he got nearer to them, he could inexplicably hear loud and catchy jazz music that seemed to only be audible inside his brain. It reminded him that he really needed to pick up the trumpet again – and not in the sense of equipping a Mystery Gear.

For some reason, a heavyset man and a lithe llama were running at top speed to get away from a man even beefier than Gaston, a purple tent affixed to his back. From within the tent, a thin old woman dressed in swanky high fashion leaned forward with an expression of malicious glee.

Xigbar ducked behind a tree to watch the scene play out. The party being chased came to a great chasm. The man in the green poncho helped the llama rig up a vine to swing across; they deftly landed on the other side and resumed the escape. Meanwhile, the strongman had pulled a cord to eject a pair of flapping fabric wings from the tent; he and the old woman both affixed aviators’ goggles to their faces.

They leapt. The wings carried them halfway across the ravine.

Then, from completely nowhere, a thundercloud appeared, striking them down and electrocuting them in the process.

Xigbar was no fool. He could tell that those two didn’t mean well. Why else would anyone dress in such flamboyant clothing and demand to be carried on another’s back, not to mention be chasing someone else? The problem was that he had developed a certain fondness for people who didn’t mean well.

On the horizon, a great palace loomed. He’d been keeping it in sight the whole way. It was the only place the four could have been racing to: a golden monolith shaped vaguely like a crowned emperor’s head.

Xigbar brought out a single gun, tapping it to convert the bullet from ammunition to a warping spell. This would take whoever it hit directly from the point of impact to the palace.

As the villains plummeted, Xigbar took aim and fired. The spell pierced the tent and its bearer, taking them both away.

He chuckled, trying to imagine the looks on the others’ face when they realized their foes had beaten them to the palace. “Good luck trying to explain how you got back there before them,” he laughed, strolling away to continue looking for heartless, his arrows diverting from the trail of the chase.

But all good things must come to an end.

Xigbar had almost liked hopping from world to world and having these casual encounters more than the grand plan. That wasn’t a good sign. He needed to get back on track. Luckily, the
chosen one of the hour arrived to set him straight.

The boy was so strange. Sora, they called him. He bore Roxas within him, but he was a
different beast entirely. Roxas, he smacked of the sins Xigbar had seen in the Foretellers. He was
an angry boy, one who ate too much ice cream and hoarded his munny, even if he was good at
heart. But Sora, despite containing the sum of Roxas, was strangely devoid of sin. Not an Acedia
or a Luxuria to be found within him. Superbia, maybe, but only the illusion of it; he would be glad
to give up his own self-image to help that of a friend. The only way you could accuse this boy of
sin was if you redefined stupidity as the eighth.

Xigbar died again, this time at the boy’s hands. In the name of the greater good. He’d put
on a good show before going out – giving Sora a taste of what he was capable of, even without No
Name. But it was pageantry. He knew he was supposed to die there, and be reborn again, as Braig
the whole.

They kept calling him Xigbar after that, and he was never quite sure if he was Braig or
Xigbar. Or maybe he was becoming Luxu again. The time was drawing nigh to make the distant
past relevant, and that brought with him several questions of identity. Which was real? Braig?
Xigbar? Luxu? The confident, strutting man he was, or the shy, passive boy he’d been?

The Xehanort collective inducted him into the True Organization, and they moved house
from the World That Never Was to the Keyblade Graveyard after the dream-drop incident. Xigbar
was sure the Master had seen that one coming, too. It was hilarious, really. The Master had to have
known millennia in advance just how many times over Xehanort would fail and die, only to try for
another bite.

One day, while pacing the Graveyard and bemoaning just how dull it was in comparison to
literally any other evil encampment the ‘Norts could have picked, Xigbar accidentally kicked
something up out of the dust. It glittered in the harsh sunlight. Xigbar knelt to examine it, thinking
it munny.

It was a small golden pendant on a chain. A trumpet.

His blood ran cold.

He stood. Drew back his hand as if to launch the tiny charm across the Graveyard. Then, at
the last second, pocketed it instead.

Ava wouldn’t be coming at the same time as the others. He knew this. He had known this
ever since their clash, when the necklace had been lost. At the time when he most needed to let go
of her, he was grateful to have something with which to hold onto her.

Maybe there was a part of him that hadn’t changed as much as he had thought.

At long last, the Keyblade War.

After all the buildup, it was almost a letdown. Just a handful of people with fancy weapons
duking it out in the desert, in the middle of the day. Like one of Ira’s games.

(It would get more interesting after his part had been played, but he wouldn’t stick around
for that.)

It was Sora, of course, who defeated him the second time. Who told him he wasn’t worthy
to wield No Name. Xigbar wondered why Sora thought him so unworthy. He’d seen people who
were plenty evil tote it around – the ‘Norts, Vanitas, so on and so forth. And people who were plenty Dark. Riku. Terra.

Maybe it was because the boy claimed to derive power from friendship, and as far as he could see, Xigbar had no friends and never did.

If only he knew.

Xigbar stole the victory from Sora. He blinked himself to a higher precipice, then let himself fall. It was the impact that cracked him open, ended him again only to rebirth him as yet another Xigbar-Braig.

He didn’t see what happened after that. All he knew was that when he came to, Xig-Braig once more, he had No Name back in his hand. At long last, his role was finished.

A relief. A disappointment. A catharsis. He’d taught himself not to cry, so to the outsider, he looked perfectly stoic, bemused as usual. But his eons of work had at last come to an end.

Sometimes it amazed him, that he could still remember, after millennia, after seeing more worlds than most people could conceive of, the place where he started, the names and the faces of those with whom he began. But they were imprinted upon him like an etching due never to erode.

He called them back. All but Ava and the Master. One who shouldn’t come and one who couldn’t come. It really struck him, as he spoke to them, how much he’d changed, but they hadn’t. There was more friction between him and the rest than ever before. It wasn’t as it had been. This grand reunion should have been something joyous, full of embraces and tears. Instead, it was stone-cold business. Was it the length of time spent apart, or the Master’s final actions that had changed them all?

They called him “Luxu.” He still didn’t know, at this time, if he was Luxu again or not. Maybe he wasn’t Luxu, Xigbar, or Braig. He certainly had his pick of options.

He insisted it was still the same self at the core that he always had been. Why had he said that? It wasn’t true. Maybe he wanted it to be true. Maybe he wanted to revert, to become weaker and worse, to exchange all of his ill-gotten gain for innocence.

They asked where Ava was, of course. He deflected the question. The trumpet charm felt heavier in his pocket. And then, at last, they demanded to know what role the Master had given him.

He drew their attention to the box behind him. “I hope you like long stories.”
Secret Epilogue: Master of Masters

Poor Luxu. He’d probably thought that this whole time, the Master had been in one place. As if. When you knew the future, you knew where to go for the action. He’d always had a hand in things; he just never revealed it. After all, if even Luxu knew everything he had done, that might just rip open time and space itself, or something equally horrible.

Or perhaps Luxu would just be very, very angry with him for not being honest.

Currently, he was located in Shibuya, sitting atop a tall skyscraper. The moon hung high overhead. The Master put out both hands, forming a heart shape around it. Shibuya was only a very recent development. He’d needed to be where Sora was. That was pivotal.

He’d even put on his original face for the occasion. Or, more accurately, his true face. After all, one eye was missing, and the other had yellowed through the Darkness.

He watched the stars twinkle until the soft light of dawn began to break over the city. Time to go to work. To pretend to be ordinary.

He began the trek to the far side of town. He’d always been there, wherever Luxu went. Oh, it would have frustrated Luxu so much to know that not only had the Master not trusted him to get things done on his own, but had refused to come out and show how much he was helping. But Luxu had always been destined to bend space. Always ended up wherever he shouldn’t be. So prone to getting lost. And it wasn’t like Luxu was the Master’s only agenda, anyway. He had done a myriad of things, shifting roles with each world.

And personalities. Unlike Luxu, who’d taken forever to shift from one to a second, the Master had a whole deck of emotional disguises he could wear. He could turn on a dime from order to chaos.

Speaking of chaos…

He passed a gigantic trash heap, a Dadaist masterpiece. Living citizens would have wondered why it was there. Those in the UG would have been able to see the artist perched proudly at its peak.

All the Master had to do was give it a kick at the base. A single broken television fell out of place, and then the whole pile came crashing down, taking the artist with it in a stream of trigonometrically-inclined curses.

“Chaos, chaos!” the Master cried with glee, hopping about, like he’d used to do when the world revolved. When he’d tried to teach Luxu this lesson. See, at present, the Master was rather stuck. He couldn’t leave the UG, not without paying the standard price. And yet he didn’t consider himself imprisoned, despite being confined to a single world, a single city, a single plane of existence. He felt all the freedom in the worlds. He could do anything he wanted, all right here. After all, the world only ended where you set its boundaries. Some important people here could tell you that.

Luxu? He was so entrenched in the ideas of destiny and self-actualization that he had taken far too long to realize he didn’t have to gun for the goal. He had access to innumerable worlds, eternal lives, and yet chose to trap himself.

As for the artist, he was peeling himself out of the rubble, turning his furious gaze upon the
Master. “What the foil were you operating, yoctogram?”

“I can do anything, M&M’s,” the Master replied. “And I felt like doing that.”

“You son of a binary – “

The Master chuckled as he turned away from the Reaper who was now reassembling his work into a new pile of nonsense. Waving goodbye in the process. Yes, chaos was fun. But it wasn’t the be-all, end-all. There was a reason he was able to adopt personalities so quickly.

A little trick he’d passed on to one of his daughters, who he’d trusted to make use of the technique. Bored of yourself? Just make a new you! That hadn’t been the best of lifetimes, though, he thought as he looked down at his feet, his pink boots trailing glitter across the sidewalk, sparkling in the morning dawn. Well, the ending of it had been fun, watching his daughter ascend to transform their world into absolute disorder. But he hadn’t really wanted to end Luxu’s time there. Especially not so brutally. But Luxu had been about to prolong his stay past where it ever should have been. Someone had to keep him from spinning his wheels in the same world without getting anywhere. It had never been the breeding ground for apprentices that he’d thought it to be.

As for the overkill? Well, he’d been spending too much time with his daughter, he supposed. He hadn’t been like that afterward.

Really, he wasn’t much like that most of the time. When Luxu had returned from his extended stay in the mysterious other worldline – lost as usual – the Master had taken it upon himself (herself at the time, actually) to mentor him (her, at the time) a second time. Without Luxu ever knowing. And she’d thought things had been mostly the same. But even so, Luxu had stunned her by accusing her of being irresponsible, an improper parent. Not that she took stock in actual parentage, but how had Luxu changed so much over the course of her hiatus that she no longer found entertainment in the Master’s turns of phrase and devil-may-care attitude?

As much as the Master hadn’t been honest with Luxu, he really did care about him. He cared in his own way, which perhaps wasn’t the way people should be cared for. But it was those days underground that convinced him he needed to do something different. In truth, his journey hadn’t been so different from Luxu’s after all. He had a deck of personalities to switch through for purposes of disguise, but as for who he truly was, he had seen fit to stop being so casual and start being more serious. More dignified. More of the sort who you would think knew what he was doing.

And it had really worked in his favor. As much as he could play the part of the instigator of chaos, he was different now, too. Luxu had become who the Master had used to be, and the Master had become a third beast entirely. One who didn’t have time to deal with his former self’s immaturity.

At last, he reached his place of employment. WildKat, a café on the very edge of Shibuya. As this was a youth district, the bar scene was not a great place to be employed. All the same, he did enjoy a good callback. From overly invested bartender to overly invested barista. And this place was one of the few that allowed people from the UG to become visible inside.

In fact, the proprietor, Sanae Hanekoma, who had almost as many secrets in his back pocket as did the master, greeted him with a nickname based on that: “O.I.B.! You’re early. Couldn’t wait to overhear the gossip, could you?”

“Droll, truly,” he sighed.
“Well, come on in,” Hanekoma invited. “Get that stuffy cloak off.”

The Master proceeded to the back room, where he unzipped the cloak and hung it up. Beneath it, he wore a startlingly ordinary-looking outfit (by his standards, anyway) – baggy-legged pants, deep burgundy, that went with the trend of the times. A black turtleneck sweater, and a thinner coat, the same burgundy as the pants, that went between his Keybearer’s uniform and his daywear, just as an accent. And, of course, the boots that shed glitter everywhere. By now, he refused to change them out just out of spite.

He pinned on his golden name tag. The one no one ever believed, in this town. They always asked if it were a joke. He always replied that he would never joke about something such as his name, but if they wished to believe him a liar, they were free to do so. Then he would throw in something he’d overheard from them three weeks back, just to scare them. It was, in fact, his real name. The first name he’d ever had, back in Daybreak Town. He figured that since the book would soon be closing, it was only fitting to end the last chapter wearing the same name as he had for the first.

He skimmed the coffee machine to make a cup for himself, running a hand back through his hair as he quickly downed it. He’d already run the gamut of thoughts about Luxu in his mind. It was best to move on to other matters. Luxu would find him eventually, and he could deal with it all at that moment, not a second before.

The tragedy he didn’t know: the closest he’d ever been to his apprentice was in another worldline entirely. One where he wasn’t Luxu’s version of the Master, and that Luxu wasn’t his version of Luxu, but all the same, they had seen sides of each other that had never been revealed before. Sides that perhaps didn’t quite translate to the worldline of commonplace Keyblades.

The coffee was finished, the cup neatly rinsed out. Then he checked his reflection in the mirror one last time. Making sure his hair, jet-black with a single streak of white in the bangs, was coiffed with no strays. Chuckling once more at the patch over his eye that matched Luxu’s current facewear exactly, and the fact that his other eye had finally corrupted over from its original ocean blue into the glowing gold of the Heartless.

He gave his jacket one more straighten, then entered the café proper to greet the morning crowd.

“Ah, a pleasant morning to you, as well,” Master of Masters Hades told his first customer, with the air of one who knows something you most certainly don’t. “And how may I be of service to you on this day?”

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