The Ship That Never Was

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Summary

The sea is a merciless place.

Besieged by a heartless pirate crew, taken in a raid on their new home, and put into play in mutineers' games, orphaned brothers Roxas and Sora are more likely to find mercy in those unfeeling waters.
There was a choice of bustling taverns in this particular port town, but none so obviously grand as *The Usual Spot.*

Perhaps 'grand' was not apt; 'popular' was a more clear-cut word. The path leading up to it was crowded with sailors coming and going, but most were trying to find their way in. Damn near every crammed-in table was laden down with drink, damn near every seat occupied with someone bursting with lecherous laughter. Candles on tables and in brackets on the walls gave off a muted orange glow, and combined with their warmth, the heat given off by so many bodies radiated out the wide open door into the cool evening. It created quite a welcoming atmosphere, when Axel was already buzzing from the last tankard he'd chugged down and had Demyx on his arm.

It wasn't their first stop since getting docking at the harbour. He'd 'accidentally' claimed him from the rest of the crew at the last inn just by draping an arm over him and suggesting they try out the other local entertainment.

He'd agreed, bubbly and in a much better mood with a few drinks in him. Good enough to sing so loudly he could probably be heard over the din, in fact.

“Up jumps the crab with the crooked legs, saying 'you play the cribbage and I'll stick the pegs!' Singin' blow the wind westerly, let the wind blow! By a gentle nor'wester, how steady she goes!” Demyx stumbled into his path, nearly tangling his legs with Axel's and nearly tripping up their temporary, and unwilling, escort.

Saix wouldn't stay in a place like this, but he only needed to be around long enough to know where the pair of them would be for the next little while. Just in case the Captain needed to call them back in a hurry.

“Keep yourselves in one piece,” he instructed, his familiar growl uncomfortably close to Axel's ear following their minor collision. There was very little real concern; if Saix wasn't intimately acquainted with Axel's value, he'd have no reason to care at all if something befell him. “And don't spend all the gold.”

“We'd just take it back,” Axel's head tilted back, a smirk playing on his lips that threatened to become a laugh, and broadening when Saix pulled away.

Which was, frankly, somewhat of a shame. Even with Demyx's charms, he'd crawl into Saix's bed sooner, any day.

The musical blonde had missed their exchange, hands wrapping loosely around Axel's shoulders once Saix had turned away.

“Drinks?” he inquired with a broad, sloshed smile, as he was steered into the nearest open chair.

“A wench'll be by soon,” Axel dropped into the sturdy seat beside him, watching Saix go with an irritable shake of his head. He would be going to cozy up to their Superior, no doubt... It would be in both of their best interests to inspire and keep their Captain's trust.

Elbows sliding over the tabletop and holding his chin high, Axel scanned for a tavern maid to flag down while Demyx resumed his boisterous singing.

Funny thing - there weren't only maids. That was intriguing. Then again, many of the island towns
catered to a clientele that had been out at sea so long they cared only that the flesh on display was young and pretty, growing more and more unashamed the farther they sprawled from the mainland. Axel much preferred the firmness of a man's body, and could find many things to like about the tavern boy ducking some of the rowdier men to get to their table.

He was mussed, short, and tanned, a sweet face with brilliant blue eyes. Very nearly the sort of boy Axel could fall in love with for a night, though he wouldn't say no to keeping him company regardless. Dressed to indicate that he was a servant, with the thick leather choker to identify him as property and a corset-like vest only half the length it should be, he scrambled to them almost frantically. Axel would've bet money – if he was the gambling type – that the tavern owner was the sort to beat his workers when they didn't move fast enough.

“What sort'a drinks are you lookin’ for?” No preamble, no flirty introduction. It seemed the boy was all business.

Axel grinned, letting Demyx slide into him. “Whatever's cheap and strong.”

“Right away, loves,” the boy spoke like he knew the language, but wasn't entirely comfortable using it yet. It came out sounding embarrassed, and if Axel were a lesser man, he would have laughed.

Demyx, the lesser man, giggled to himself and went flush. “A really big drink...”

“You don't need much more,” Axel countered under his breath, but didn't care to actually refuse him. Really, he didn't care to do much other than appraise the lines of the tavern boy's stomach.

“Will you be staying for the show, as well?”

Axel's eyes flickered back up to the boy's face, intrigued. “Show?” he echoed.

He was already starting to turn, giving Axel a teasing glimpse of ruffles over his ass, making it hard to see much more that might tempt him. “It's three gold pieces to see it, or clear out in five minutes.”

One eyebrow raised sharply – three gold pieces wasn't cheap, but he carried much more than that on him when they were at shore. He could have predicted Demyx's reaction, though, if only because he wouldn't feel up to leaving yet.

“I wan'to see a show,” Demyx slurred, not caring what it might entail.

If he was being truthful, gun to his head, he wasn't feeling any strong drive to vacate yet, either. His smirk split wider, and he rummaged through his pouch to withdraw four gold coins. “Three for the show... One for drink.”

“Three each,” the boy corrected, extending a hand for them with all the confidence of his tavern-speech.

He was probably easy to fluster.

Leaning closer over the table, he lowered his eyes to the tavern boy's beltline. “Could I... persuade you?”

Apparently, he was more accustomed to that, as he put his hands on the tabletop and looked both Axel and Demyx over with a quick eye. It wasn't calculating or mentally undressing, though – it was for another purpose, sweet face more solemn. “Can tell you're...sailors,” he picked his words carefully. “You don't know what you're in for... What plenty of men would pay a much heftier sum for.”
“And I'm offering you something you can't put a price on,” he purred. “But, if that's how you'd rather play it...”

Deft, slender fingers plucked three more gold coins from the pouch and added them to the small pile.

That seemed to throw him off at last. The boy gathered up the coins but hesitated, voice betraying him. “What d'you mean?”

“How 'bout you have a drink on me, when the show starts? I can see about showing you,” Axel grinned.

Demyx laughed again, more red than before, and obviously not just from the alcohol.

The boy's pretty blue eyes widened and he stammered, “I-I can't. I'll, um, get those drinks for you.”

“That's a shame,” Axel called after him, watching him dart back towards the bar. He didn't quite make it that far, grabbed around the waist by an amorous drunk. Someone could have intervened, but Axel didn't feel particularly compelled towards chivalry. These things were expected; he'd get free of the man and get them their drinks soon enough.

Still, this tavern endeared itself less and less... And more and more, at the same time.

He leaned in a little closer to Demyx absently, ruminating, “The others will be coming here, won't they?” He paused, glancing at his friend. Red-faced, overheated, tactile and wanting and easy. Xigbar, if no one else, wouldn't be able to go for too long without chasing Demyx down like a groom after his teasing bride. “Of course they will.”

“Mn...?” Demyx didn't seem to be really listening.

“Never you mind,” he shrugged, “just getting a few ideas, is all.”

“What...?” Demyx laughed harder, more breathlessly, as his chair was pulled a little closer to Axel's.

“What ideas?”

“You're tired of being tossed around the crew, aren't you?”

It was a couple of minutes before the tavern boy returned with heavy tankards of frothing liquid.

“Here you are,” there was a light puff of breath as he set them down carefully, earning a narrow-eyed stare from Axel. Demyx, unconcerned, dragged his ale close to take a long swig.

“That'll do for now. Where's the rest?” Axel didn't know if his coin covered the cost of two, or more, but if he didn't ask... Well, the tavern master probably wouldn't want the boy to give them their money's worth unless Axel squeezed it out of them.

Mostly, though, he just wanted to antagonize the boy and see if he could get those blue eyes to shine brighter.

“The... The rest?” He seemed almost disoriented, and Axel grimaced, unimpressed.

“You mean this is it?”

That sparked a change; he looked caught, like a frightened animal. “I'm sorry! Won't be a moment!”

Amused, Axel took a victorious drink and watched the boy scurry off. The atmosphere around them was changing, people making room on the tabletops and quieting their uproar to a lower, more excitable tone. A few patrons stood and paid off the last of their drinks before leaving, and their seats
were quickly claimed. The main door at last was shut, barring entrance to anyone who hadn't paid. It was tense, anticipatory, an obvious indication that 'the show' was due to start.

There was a curtain-covered doorway at the opposite end of the tavern, leading onto another room, that had escaped Axel's notice until people were starting to turn their eyes and chairs towards it. From behind the ratty drape – barely visible, with all the people in the way – Axel saw a flash of blonde.

Others must have glimpsed it, too, if the whistles and hoots of approval were anything to go by.

The tavern boy was much quicker to return this time with two more overflowing tankards, but he had a private sort of smile on his face as he put them both down and reached over to extinguish a candle. “That's the show...”

Demyx had sat up, catching Axel's sleeve in a blind attempt to grab at him. “Hey...”

He shifted to get a better view, inspired by Demyx's interest. He was not disappointed.

The blonde had made his way past the curtain and practically drifted into the view of the entire bar, not needing any music to roll his body to an unknown and alluring rhythm. There was a garment similar to the tavern boy's binding his chest, but most of him was draped in throwaway tatters of silk, lace, satin brocade and all manner of fabrics Axel couldn't put a name to, tucked or tied anywhere available. The only finery he wore didn't look to belong to him - a pair of leather boots, right up to his thigh, and a ballroom mask which obscured near everything but his lips and a flash of his eyes.

His hair was such a brilliant shade of gold.

Around these parts, he'd be called exotic. Axel could see the appeal... For many reasons. Unconsciously, he moved to the edge of his chair with a purr.

The masked youth held out a gloved hand with a delicate air, having a muscled patron help him up onto the table and slipping right out of the man's grasp in the very same movement. He hadn't gotten to touch for more than a blink of an eye. From atop the table, his petite stature was more obvious – the same height as their little tavern boy, or thereabouts. Rather, he would be, without the heels of his long boots raising him a few inches more.

That had to be what Demyx was liking about him. His obsession with their undersized shipmate was plain, and he was undoubtedly entertaining romantic notions of what it would be like to hold someone of that size.

Axel's thoughts weren't quite on that wavelength. He'd forgotten his drinks, giving all his attention to the swaying boy.

He wasn't a dancer. The way he moved wasn't really dancing at all, but it was sensual and fluid. It was full-bodied, never just taking a step. His hips followed the motion of his feet, and he drifted into a crouch to receive a handful of coins from an eager patron. While Axel couldn't quite see the man's reward, from where he sat, he was obviously getting special attention and became the subject of envious cheers from the other men.

Demyx glanced at Axel, not managing to catch his eye now that he was so intent. “...Ideas?”

“Yeah...”

The entertainment pulled back from the man slowly, turning his face towards the others holding up gold to tempt him over. Very briefly, the gloved hand lifted and pulled the mask just-slightly, and
Axel caught a glimpse of stunning blue.


He'd stamped his high heel on the table, making gold clatter, and bent low to pick up coins. His bow-lips formed a theatrical pout as he counted them (or pretended to), seeming to lose interest and taking a long stride onto the next table.

... But they'd paid enough to earn their reward, it seemed, as once he'd dropped the gold into his pouch he began searching behind himself to pluck the laces of his corset free.

Axel took a brief look into his own gold pouch.

“Axel,” Demyx frowned, a parody of reproach. “You're not allowed to-... Is this part of your idea?”

“A part of it.”

Ahead of him, the entertainer's fingers twined with the cord and unlaced it in little time, but suddenly held the corset to himself as though embarrassed. There were jeers, among the catcalls, but more gold was being held up or tossed his way as incentive to let it drop.

“Tease,” Axel snickered to himself, jangling the pouch absently. He wouldn't hear that, over the dim... He wouldn't lure him over with just that. “I like that, too.”

Once enough coin had hit the table, so did the corset. Most of him was still covered in throwaway strips of lavish fabrics, prominently a silken sash tied at his waist.

“Demyx,” Axel nudged the other under the table and grabbed his leg, unconsciously licking his lips. “Reinforcements.”

“Are you gonna start a brawl?” Demyx leaned in and whispered, slurring slightly.

“More than a brawl. Just get them ready and get them here,” he let go of Demyx to let him up, allowing him a moment to finish off the tankard he'd started.

The entertainer kicked away the corset into someone's greedy hands and gathered more coins into the pouch at his hip. He faced the crowd again, searching for a new place to settle. Axel waited until Demyx had left the table and the stripping blonde seemed to be looking his way.

His eyes never left him as he upturned the entirety of his purse onto the table, spilling a considerable amount of gold onto the surface with a deafening clink and clatter. Not all covetous looks were on their entertainment, now – his gold was getting hungry looks from those nearby, but the only reaction Axel cared for was his.

The boy's lips had parted, mouth open slightly in shock. He needed a few helping lifts across tables to get to his, heel spearing the pile of coins.

He was so close, so suddenly. Axel's gaze travelled up his body, voice lowered to a purr and greeting him with, “Hello, lovely.”

Those eyes were so much prettier up close, and he was quickly and willingly acquainted with one of his long legs. He rested his shoe against Axel's chest as he stepped over the gold, leaning over him and letting the sturdiness of the chair keep them both upright.

Axel didn't realize he was holding his breath, or that he was quite so transfixed, as the boy slid the
mask down.

His face was so much like the tavern boy... But so much lovelier, also.

His lips twitched, maybe amused at Axel's expression – whatever it was – and he spoke for the first time since coming out from behind that curtain. “You're very generous,” it was hushed; his voice was only for the highest bidder, right then, and like a damned fool Axel let himself feel like that made him special.

He dropped the smirk, the cockiness that went with it, and stared. “And you're gorgeous.”

Slowly, the blonde unwrapped the sash, taking a step back off of his shoulder and letting the smooth cloth fall into Axel's lap.

He remembered himself a little, then. He looked over the stripping boy with lustful intent, watched him glance at the pile of coins and bend nearly in half to unbuckle one of the long boots. Apparently, this price earned him a little more skin.

Leaning forward as though following his lead, Axel muttered near his ear, “How much would it take to let me take you away and have you all to myself?”

He was only half joking.

The blonde loosened both boots before kicking them away carelessly and moving down onto his knees in front of him. He let a few of the gold pieces roll between his fingers as though savouring the feel of them before dropping them into the pouch. “You would have to take that up with the bar master,” he replied, not sounding as though he thought much of Axel's question. He probably heard that one a lot.

He didn't know how serious he was. Not for coin, maybe... But he was more and more sure that he wanted this one.

“I intend to,” Axel began to smirk again, briefly flirting with the idea of touching him.

He was making it tempting, legs parted in front of him with little to keep him modest but the tattered remains of what might have once been trousers and the extravagant scraps.

He wasn't pleasing the crowd quite so much now, though. They were protesting how much time he was spending on one man, others starting to empty their purses onto the table impulsively.

Axel snickered lowly, tilting his head up so close, he could have kissed him if he'd really wanted to. He hadn't pulled away, just yet. “...Your public awaits,” he muttered, green eyes intent on blue. “You're welcome.”

The boy visibly swallowed and quickly slipped his mask back on, hurrying to load the pouch with Axel's riches.

He watched the performer go, hauling his tankard over and draining it dry in the time it took for the blonde to teasingly shed many of the cloth strips. Without him close, anymore, he was increasingly impatient for Demyx to return with the crew.

Still with a couple of drinks on the table, the tavern boy was returning with another pair of ales – so much cheaper than he tried to pass it off as being, Axel noted, if this was still covered by his gold coin. Cold amber liquid spilled over his hands as he breathlessly put them down and announced, “More drinks!”
“Mm,” Axel grunted, watching the entertainer crawl up to another well-paying patron with a silver piece between his teeth, his hands going for his last scrap of clothing.

The door flew open.

Damn near half the crew was touching Demyx in some way, draped on him or skimming up his shirt or over his arm. That alone may have stolen some of the attention from the poorer clientele, coping with neglect, but Axel admittedly was the one to steal the moment. A shame, as the blonde's naked body would have otherwise been the highlight of the night.

The tavern boy was yanked forward, a blade drawn from the inside of Axel's boot and thrust under his neck, right above the leather choker. “I'll be having your attention, now, even though Gorgeous over there deserves it more,” he called, and the boy cried out in panic, undoubtedly what he'd been suspicious of all along.

“Pirates!”

The response was immediate and rushed. The cowardly, or the few who came unarmed were shoving back from their tables to make for the door only to be blocked for the moment by the imposing figure of Lexaeus. Axel barely managed to keep track of the performer in the chaos as his eyes shot open wide and he sprang up, grabbing all the coin he could as he darted away behind the curtain again.

“You're not wrong, but that's quicker than I would've credited you for,” he jerked the tavern boy a little closer to quell his kicking and squirming.

Luxord was unwinding his arm from around Demyx, eyeing the considerable amounts of gold still heaped on the tables with an air of amusement. “Good haul... Nice find.”

Some of the unwise were drawing their weapons, or trying to wrestle their gold back onto their persons, which the most intimidating and unyielding figure watched with absolutely no interest.

Xemnas, their Captain, appeared wholly unimpressed as he looked over the tavern as though he owned it.

“Kill the ones who don't run,” he instructed indifferently.

A harsh, nigh-deafening crack rang through the air as Xigbar put a bullet in the heads of two bulky men who clearly had a fight on their minds. He had to pull off of Demyx to hold out his pair of pistols, holding them high and spraying the walls with blood.

The others scattered, shrill laughter cutting through the clamour, but Saix approached Axel with more interest in his struggling hostage. “This one, as well?”

“Captain, I've got a couple in mind for hostages...or deck hands,” Axel's grip tightened, sounding breezy. “Or anything, really.”

“Leave them for now, Saix,” Xemnas probably didn't care for Axel's reasoning, but he wanted the patrons and staff dead first and foremost before he gave any consideration to lust-inspired proposals. He might listen, though, just because of the circumstances that lead to Demyx being so often occupied; their main source of labour was made useless by the hungers of his crew.

Saix's growl wasn't loud enough for Xemnas to pick up on, but he obeyed, lunging at a badly-swaying patron who was too inebriated to get out in time.

“Watch this for me, will you?” Axel shoved the tavern boy at Demyx, knowing he wouldn't want to
get involved in the killing, anyway.

He caught him in time, before he could get free, seizing him by the arm and wrestling him relatively still. “But-...”

He didn't stay to hear whatever Demyx wanted to say. Axel needed to find the blonde.

Seizing the opportunity, though, the tavern boy managed to squirm hard out of his grip and made a dash for the door.

He didn't get very far.

Luxord grabbed at him with an iron grip around his chin, tilting his chin far back to inspect his face. “Such a sweet face on this one...”

The boy swallowed heavily, trying to shake him off and yelling, “Roxy!”

From his hiding place, the blonde flinched.

He couldn't expose himself by running into the fray or trying to find a way outside. He'd slipped into a split in one of the walls that only he was small enough to wedge himself into, one hand holding onto his money pouch tightly to keep it from clinking and the other hand gripping a short dagger. If he had to use it, it wouldn't be the first time he'd defended himself inside these walls.

Oddly light footfalls had breached the slight cloth barrier muffling the slaughter in the room beyond. Someone was definitely in here with him...

“Come on, Gorgeous, I won't bite unless you ask...” - but the other boy's call had tipped him off. “Roxy?” he tested.

Roxas knew the voice – the man who had tempted him over with a small fortune, the same man who had incited all this, and taken his brother as a hostage.

He closed his eyes tightly. They were going to do something horrific to him, if he was caught. But they might have already done something to Sora. He sank farther into the splintered crack, starting a mantra in his head. Getting them both caught wouldn't make anything any better... He just had to pray that Sora was worth enough to them alive.

But they could do so much worse than kill him.

“I'm not a bad man, you know,” Axel was checking every nook and cranny he came across, listening hard for even the slightest sound of metal on metal. There was no mistaking the glint he’d seen in the performer's eyes up close. He knew gold-lust well; the boy wouldn't have abandoned the coin. He just had to listen...

“I'm still the man who gave you his entire purse... Still the man who thinks you're the most gorgeous thing he's ever seen... Come now. At least come out long enough for us to talk?”

Sora was still calling from the other room, loud enough to be heard over the sounds of combat. Roxas tried to focus on his voice, moving just a little to tilt his ear towards it in hopes that he'd hear some clue of what they planned to do with him.

One of the gold coins slipped, and clattered to the floor as loud as a gunshot.

Axel's head turned sharply, following the sound back to the source. “There you are,” he grinned,
looking right into the crack in the wall.

The dagger came out first, right at Axel's throat, just deep enough to break the skin.

Roxas slipped out easily after it, trying to duck around him, but Axel was quick... And, worse, not thrown off by the attack. He knocked at Roxas's arm, trying to get the dagger away, and seized him around the waist to pull him too close to struggle. “None of that,” he hissed.

Panic clutched at Roxas's insides. He hadn't had the time to redress, and was all-too aware of what pirates do. He tried to shove at him, kick, get his dagger back, all the while spitting, “You evil-...”

“'Evil' is a little harsh,” Axel cut him off, nearly by pressing his lips to the blonde's. He was close enough to do it.

“Take me out there!” The blonde shoved at him with his full upper body, less afraid of Axel and more of what they might do to Sora. Roxas was caught; his efforts to stay hidden for the chance of making a rescue wasted.

All that was left was to be by his brother's side for whatever came next.

“Planned on it... Roxy,” Axel sneered a little, wrestling him into a better grip and pulling him back into the other room.

It was...much quieter. There wasn't much left but bodies, toppled tankards, broken chairs and tables. So much was sticky with gore and ale, piles of gold cleared from the tables and being counted out by a couple of members of the crew. Demyx had been shafted once again with the unpleasant task of plucking coins from the bloody pools, an expression of drunken distaste wrinkling his nose.

Driven by instinct, the blonde in Axel's iron grip made a leap for freedom... towards the gold.

Axel more sure of him by the moment.

“Roxas!” Sora began to fight Luxord's hold again, spurred by relief.

“See this one, Cap'n?” Axel dragged Roxas as close to his chest as he could, with his resistance. “Born to be a pirate, am I right?”

They hadn't taken on another crew member since Larxene, so there was a certain amount of absurdity to the suggestion. Still, Xemnas stepped over a body with a calculating air, inspecting the near-nude boy in his clutches.

“Axel,” there was a certain knowing disapproval in Xemnas's otherwise monotone voice.

“Ulterior motives aside, I mean what I say,” Axel defended. There was a need in Roxas that was so intriguing...

Head bowed somewhat, Roxas interrupted in a murmur, “Can I have my shoes back?”

“Demyx,” Axel jerked his head over towards where he'd been seated; the boots were still at the table, no longer warm with body heat. “Get the boots.”

Grabbing gold as he went, Demyx went to snatch them up, and was promptly sidetracked by an unscathed tankard.

Roxas's eyes narrowed, and he watched the slow progress until Sora visibly flinched. He was still in Luxord's grip, but another of the pirates, one with grey-streaked hair and a missing eye had taken an
interest in what his face might be worth, leering far too close.

“Don't you touch him,” Roxas tried to jerk free, snarling in Xigbar's direction. Far from dissuaded, he seemed to find the anger both amusing and further incentive to drag a finger along Sora's jaw. Sora turned his head away as much as he could, but it wasn't an escape from the touch.

“They're all harmless until the Captain gives the word,” Axel's voice came right against his ear, his captor bending to speak. It was all the more infuriating, coupled with his falsely-comforting whisper of, “Relax...”

Demyx was coming towards them with the boots in hand, but he didn't appear incredibly eager to get too close. “He'll kick me,” he protested uncertainly.

“He will not kick you,” Xemnas sounded incredibly assured, watching Roxas with an unreadable sort of threat.

“Allow me?” Axel offered, still with Roxas's arms in a vice. Blazing blue eyes were fixed on Demyx with his boots and he held one leg forward, presenting it as though he expected a servant to put them on for him.

There was more amusement from the crewmen present, lascivious sneers and mocking sounds. Demyx let the boots drop, giving them wide berth as he circled around to take Axel's place and hold him still. He'd learned from his mishap with Sora; he held Roxas firm, cautious of him trying to break away.

Axel went to kneel in front of Roxas, taking one of the boots in hand and letting his admiring gaze flicker up over him. He was appreciating this angle more all the time.

Roxas wouldn't look at him. He continued to hold his leg out in waiting, making a sound of either impatience or disgust.

“Roxy, don't,” Sora whispered, fearful of what his attitude might incur. Far from irritated or offended, though, Axel eased the boot up over his leg, giving into the urge to let his fingers travel briefly before starting to secure the buckles.

Roxas tensed a little when shockingly warm fingertips brushed his thigh, rolling his eyes.

Axel grinned, finishing with the first boot and giving his ankle a light push to indicate he was ready for the next one. Roxas had to shift and stand uncomfortably, the heel putting him off-kilter and making the second boot a little more of a task. He made short work of it though, getting back up and finding that it was much easier to force their eyes to meet.

Gaze locked on him, Axel pulled Roxas suddenly out of Demyx's grip and turned him back around before he had much time to register the change. Demyx was more than happy to relinquish the job, weaving away from Roxas a little nervously.

“Search the rest of the tavern,” Xemnas commanded Lexaeus and Larxene, her whipcord body sidling past them all in a flash and with a wild-sounding giggle while Lexaeus went in the other direction. Leaving that in their hands, he finally appraised their pair of hostages closely. “They're frail,” he observed coldly. “They'd be pitiful labour...”

“But high value on the market,” Luxord spoke up. “Who wouldn't pay for these faces?”

“After we get a few turns with them,” Xigbar's hand was brushing Sora's cheek. Sora seemed caught between flinching away or trying to bite him.
Roxas's voice shook a little, barely controlling rage as he muttered to Axel, “Just let me be near him.”

“Two sells better than one. Auction them as a pair,” Axel drawled, giving no indication he'd listen. “Only thing that could possibly sell even better are virgins.”

Xemnas turned away from them, looking to Saix instead. “And what's your opinion?”

His tone said nothing as to whether or not he intended to give his input any weight, but the fact that he had asked settled smugly in Axel's chest. That was a good sign.

“We'd make the best profit cutting them up and selling them for scrap,” Saix almost growled, detached, and inspiring obvious panic in their captives. Matched blue eyes went as wide and round as coins, energy renewed by fear, and Roxas almost dragged Axel in a burst of adrenaline. He struggled to get closer to Sora, whose breathing was a little more ragged.

“A pair like this wouldn't make more in pieces,” Xigbar argued against Saix. “As if. Look’it those faces! What are you, twins?”

“Captain's call, 'Xiggy','” Axel snorted indifferently. Lexaeus was returning, telling their Captain there had been no other survivors – at least, not anymore – but Axel's focus was still on the blonde in his arms.

Roxas had closed his eyes and exhaled slow and heavy, apparently giving up on his struggle. “Please,” he muttered tersely. “I just want to be near him.”

“You can't get away with this!” Sora was all-but thrashing now, trying to throw Luxord off.

“We have before,” Axel informed him, cocky but warning as he dragged Roxas with him. Sora was closer, now, enough so that he figured they would both be a little more satisfied. Indeed, they seemed calmer at once, looking at each other with a sort of meaning that went overlooked by the crew.

“We'll keep them below deck while I...weigh our options,” Xemnas determined. Apparently, he saw no use in killing them now that they had hostages, and Axel had to wrestle down a victorious smirk.

“You know these two are worth more than spare parts, Cap'n,” Xigbar only relented once he'd had his say, though it was doubtful he cared either way, so long as he'd get a chance to have his fun.

Xemnas didn't look to be paying any attention, looking over the tavern for any gold left and nodding shortly, satisfied that they'd picked the place over completely. “Cuff them,” he ordered, turning his back to the crew and going to the tavern door. Saix was on his heels as they left, and Demyx very nearly followed before he was blocked by an arm practically as thick as his torso.

Lexaeus, ever prepared, held a pair of iron cuffs in front of their universally-agreed-upon errand boy. Demyx wilted a bit, accepting them and going to slap the irons on their prisoners.

“Sora,” Roxas's entire demeanour changed, imploring. “Do it.”

Luxord didn't have the opportunity to get a better hold, this time. Sora was quicker and more sure than all his struggles had been before, reaching back into the dark, ruffled bustle and tearing right through it as he drew a hidden blade.

A sword. He'd been concealing a rapier, all this time.

Axel had scarcely a second to process before Roxas had stamped a heel into the ground and kicked a short blade out of a previously unnoticed compartment, not hesitating to drive it into his captor's leg.
“Run!” Sora whipped the rapier out in front of him, the slash at Luxord having done more damage to his shirt than his body, but the surprise had been all he needed to leap out of arm's reach. Axel's grip went slack and he dropped onto one knee, hissing and swearing, while the brothers made a break for the door.

As quick as they’d been, Larxene had lit up as though anticipating an escape attempt. She leaped for Sora first, short daggers in her hands, avoiding the circular blade that went whizzing after Roxas in retaliation.

Demyx just dropped to the floor and out of the way with a cringe and a sigh of, “Oh, no...”

Sora was knocked back almost to the floor as he clashed with Larxene, but Roxas was less lucky. The chakram tore through his side, and he gasped in pain as he crouched. He grabbed at a pair of discarded daggers, trying to pick them and himself up.

One of the windows was broken, he saw now. If he could just make it through -

But he was hauled back. Lexaeus's broad arm had locked around his waist, his other large hand going to wrench the blades away from his hands.

Crawling, Demyx went to help Axel back up to his feet, hoisting him with an arm around his waist.

“You okay...?”

“I'm just golden,” he snapped. “Go. Cuffs.”

Larxene was quick and aiming to kill. Sora's surprising skill with the sword just enough to save him but not enough to interrupt her assault. His balance was lost trying just to keep up and he landed hard on his back in a pool of rapidly cooling blood. Roxas's situation was just as futile, obviously not expecting someone like Lexaeus and fighting tooth and nail just to be let down.

As light to Lexaeus as a rag doll to a child, he was carried to the wall and slammed against it – again, and again, and it was uncertain if he would stop once he'd been knocked out or if he'd keep bashing him into it until Roxas was a bloodied, broken body.

Delighted at her upper hand, Larxene pounced, knees locked right up around Sora's arms and a dagger swishing through the air towards his face.

Axel's hand stopped her.

“The face is his selling point,” he warned through gritted teeth, keeping himself upright on one leg. “Keep him still. That's all.”

“I'll go!” Sora cried out suddenly, watching Roxas go limp with unconsciousness. “Just don't kill him!”

Lexaeus drew Roxas off the wall, holding him up and looking over towards Sora with a severe expression. Demyx knelt to cuff him, first, while he was still cooperating... Which he was entirely willing to, so long as Roxas was still in their clutches.

With a petulant pout, Larxene got up off of Sora, looming over him with an air of disappointment. “If he tries to slip the cuffs, I'll cut his feet off,” she commented, honeyed by the promise to herself of more violence.

No one argued with her.
Lexaeus held Roxas so that Demyx could put the cuffs on him as well, then hoisted him over his shoulder like he was weightless. All the while, Sora watched with watering eyes, letting himself be pulled up by the wrists.

“Zexy will fix them up,” Demyx sounded uncertain, unsure if Xemnas would actually have their injuries tended to.

“‘Zexy’ will make sure I'm able to walk again, first,” Axel scowled, picking his chakram up off the ground and following the procession out of the tavern. The dusty streets were vacant, a clear shot from where they stood to the harbour.

Grander than every fishing boat and ill-reputed merchant ship tethered to port, the Ship That Never Was towered against the horizon, stark and terrible, almost ghostly against the darkening sky.

Sora went quietly, and scarcely had they finished boarding before they were pushing off back onto black open sea.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has read up to this point, and kindly left kudos/comments!

We're going to try to put out a chapter on a weekly basis, to keep the update-y-ness regular. But since this one was done early... have an early chapter!

There was always room for pettiness, aboard their ship. So long as his crew was kept in working condition – a state that was up for debate between the sufferers and higher-ranked crewmen – Xemnas couldn't have cared less about the things that might have made any another crew solid.

Camaraderie. A willingness to put aside personal feelings. Those things were not fostered between them, and most certainly not between Vexen and Axel.

When he had dragged himself to the sick bay with a thin trail of blood-drops in his wake, Vexen's immediate response was to wonder aloud if he would prefer a peg leg to a crutch.

“Made of wood, of course,” he'd sneered, and flounced towards the slab that Lexaeus had draped their wounded prisoner on. Roxas's side had been torn by the chakram, and the injury to his head would undoubtedly take time and careful monitoring, to heal. He would be patched up, just in case he really would turn out to be of use... That was encouraging, to Axel, who felt he'd done an admirable job of making their pit-stop fruitful.

But Vexen would tend to Roxas, only. Without a word, he'd made it quite clear that he had no intention of laying a hand on Axel, or his wounds.

It was not the first time, and like every refusal before, Axel wasn't particularly devastated over it.

“Grab me a cloth,” he said, rather than argue, but the tone was so inflammatory that he may as well have done. Vexen was a superior officer, to him, yet he had no qualms casually giving him orders.

“You have your other leg,” Vexen sniped. “You can get it yourself.”

He was turned towards his work, so he didn't see the rude gesture Axel made at his back. Still, he did limp towards the washed rags to wipe down his wounded throat none-too-gently. The cut was shallow, and didn't bleed afresh.

Only his leg would need stitches, and he would have to wait for those. Patiently.

Axel watched, for lack of anything else to do, as Roxas's loose blood was patted away with a wet cloth (stained from repeated use, but clean) and the needle perforated skin. The thread dragged, the ship swayed under their feet, but if Vexen could do anything well, it was keep a steady hand.

He had nearly finished with Roxas's side when the door clattered open, but it turned out Axel's wait still wasn't over. It was only Demyx, carrying his instrument on his back. It was rather like a lute, but Axel never cared to remember exactly what it was.
“...He isn't here?” Demyx's face visibly fell, disappointed.

“He's taking his time. It's almost like he doesn't want to piece me back together,” Axel eyed the sitar as Demyx sidled his way in. “How insulting.”

“I forbid you from playing that thing in here,” Vexen commanded imperiously. “I must concentrate. You needn't even be in here, there's hardly room.”

Demyx's legs folded under himself as he sat down by Axel, sitar laying across his lap and idly strumming over strings with a discontented frown. “That's a pretty long time... But he will come here, won't he?”

“Maybe he's waiting for infection to set into my leg.”

“Will you cease that racket?!” Vexen snapped louder, propping Roxas up with difficulty to inspect the back of his head. Demyx acted as though he hadn't heard him, perhaps so lost in his enamoured thoughts that he genuinely didn't.

The door opened again, though, and Zexion came in with a solemn, superior kind of expression and an apparent lack of concern about his patient's still-gaping wound. His detour had likely been to check over Sora, with Lexaeus's help, making sure they weren't leaving any open wounds to the mercy of the brig.

Not that he would have hurried, in any case. He obviously didn't care much for Axel, either, but at least he wasn't jeering him about it. Count on Zexion to be even colder than Vexen, in his way, Axel thought.

“Axel,” he greeted brusquely, crossing the room without giving so much as a glance to anyone else. He may not have given a damn about Axel, but he actually didn't seem to care about anyone else, either.

Lexaeus loomed briefly in the doorway before leaving without any word by way of parting. While he tended to linger at Zexion's side like an enormous guard dog, his duty was technically to the Captain first, and rare was the time when the ship didn't require some sort of mending that only his hulking size was suited to. Demyx looked relieved to see him go.

Vexen turned bitterly to his work, and Demyx quieted his playing.

“Zexion,” Axel mocked his tone.

“I'm amazed. You're even less amusing when you're injured,” Zexion placed both hands on the injured leg and hauled it up onto the table where he could see it, ignoring the colourful protest and giving it a cursory glance.

“Yeah, don't be careful or anything...”

He didn't appear to have even heard, placing both thumbs at the edges of the gash and inspecting for several moments in silence. “Hm. Missed anything that could kill you with blood loss, but if it festers, you could lose the leg easily,” he observed aloud, detached.

“Then how about we don't let that happen?” Axel drawled, but there was a bit of an edge hidden
under the glibness. He didn't doubt that Zexion would do a capable job of patching him up, simply as a matter of pride.

But, really, he could be quicker about it.

“Pass me that bottle in my kit,” Zexion spoke as though to the air, holding a hand out for it in full confidence that it would be in his palm within moments. And it was, Demyx scrambling to get up from where he’d been sitting and gazing up at him with adoration. He was eager to help, and got no word of thanks when Zexion uncorked it and upended the contents over Axel's wound.

It was pungent, strong alcohol, and it seared away infection. Unlike a burn, though – which Axel could take – the pain made him hiss and spit.

“*God*, for a healer you are *such* -!”

“He's helping!” Demyx defended him, or perhaps reminded. Vexen's lips tilted in asymmetrical contempt.

“Shall I sew it up as well, or just wrap it?” Zexion continued to ignore Demyx as though he was not even present.

“Get me some alcohol I can drink, and *then* sew it up,” Axel growled.

“Should I do anything?” Demyx interjected. “Can I help?”

Zexion's visible eye rolled towards the heavens with a sigh. “If a bottle of rum will get him through this quietly, then provide it.”

“I'll ask Lux!” Immediately, he was bolting off to do so. Vexen appeared further appeased, with him gone.

Axel sank back with a heavy exhale, looking over the top of Zexion's head while he dabbed another one of the rags with alcohol to clean the edges of the wound a bit more meticulously. Vexen seemed to have determined that the damage to Roxas's head wasn't worth worrying about. Axel wasn't sure what he'd expected to see; bandages, maybe. Obvious swelling. He'd passed out, so Lexaeus hadn't gone easy on him...

Vexen's green eyes, like chips of ice on seawater, caught Axel's. The smug bastard appeared amused.

“... *What*?” Axel took the bait, after a beat of silence.

“You're being remarkably childish over a little scratch,” Vexen replied snidely. Zexion made a distant sound of agreement, dropping the rag on the table to begin preparing a needle.

“How about I put a blade through your leg? See if it's a 'little scratch', then.”

“I find it surprising that you didn't see such a move coming,” Zexion remarked.

“Were you not paying close enough attention?” Vexen sneered, turning both condescending and disgusted. “No... Perhaps, paying attention too *closely*? It would be just like you.”
“We aren’t all so repressed,” Axel shot back. Vexen's expression soured.

Beyond this banter, once more, Zexion pressed Axel's leg flat to line up his needle. Reflexively, he jerked.

“You're not even going to wait? Oh, come on...”

“I have more productive things to do than wait for your comfort,” Zexion slid the needle through skin. Axel's own hands clamped down on his thigh, trying to keep himself from tugging again and hissing loudly.

“Son of a bitch-!”

Vexen laughed.

“I'm here!” The door was practically kicked open, Demyx holding a bottle of amber liquid and sporting the beginnings of a bruise on his throat. “I'm here, sorry-... Oh,” he winced, pivoting away from looking directly at Zexion's hands and their busy work. “You started.”

There was no need to respond with the obvious. Zexion pulled the thick thread through the hole he'd made, and Axel snatched the bottle right out of Demyx's hand. His teeth clamped down on the stopper and yanked, spitting it out and drinking it down.

It was definitely easier to stop himself from twitching with warmth running down his gullet.

“He didn't want to give up the bottle,” Demyx broke the silence by way of explanation, uncertain where to look. His gaze briefly landed on the needle, winding in and out of flesh like a snake and pulling the skin near-closed over the gash. He regretted it, and looked up to watch Axel's throat instead. A thin red line, the rhythmic bobbing of his Adam’s apple; he swallowed it down until the bottle was nearly drained, and then shoved it right back at Demyx's chest.

“And he needed convincing, did he?” Axel's words came out in a wheeze, following the alcoholic burn, and he lifted an eyebrow, clearly looking at Demyx's neck.

One hand clamped self-consciously over the new mark, but he didn't appear embarrassed, only caught unawares and – of course – needlessly worried about what Zexion was thinking of him.

Silly, as he was ignoring the exchange entirely. Vexen made a sound of what could have been disdain or revulsion.

Pitiless, Axel shook his head and glanced down at Zexion's handiwork. He was tying off the stitch, quick and precise if not 'careful'. That done, he reached for the dressings, dabbing off the remaining blood before he unwound them.

“That's pretty,” Axel grimaced.

“I'll check on it once a day,” Zexion wrapped the leg expertly with a strip of spare cloth and tied it off tight, above and below the wound. “Keep the area clean, and do not touch it.”

“Whatever you say, 'doctor','” Axel grabbed the side of the table for support as he stood up, testing his weight on it before grabbing his trousers and stepping into them. It was far from painless.
“Thanks, Zexy,” Demyx gave the back of his head a longing look, expressing needless gratitude when Zexion hadn't done anything for him. Someone else might have thought he was thanking him on Axel's behalf, knowing that he would never bother, but it seemed to be more something to say for the sake of speaking to him.

Vexen obviously loathed the familiarity, giving Demyx a more hateful glower than he'd ever even given Axel – and he thought he'd seen the absolute depths of his hate.

“Zexion,” the man in question corrected automatically, and turned to wipe the blood off his hands.
“Is that all?”

“Think so.” Axel wouldn't have thanked him anyway, but he decided Demyx had done that for him and made for the door.

Demyx lingered just a step behind, though. “Uh, goodbye, Zex-...ion,” he corrected, before he could be reprimanded again.

“Goodbye, Demyx,” Zexion replied without thinking anything of it, and missed the way Demyx brightened before following Axel out.

Vexen's irritation refuelled, rather wishing that Zexion had continued to treat Demyx like air unworthy of even being breathed, and there was no small amount of jealousy behind the hate.

It quickly became evident that for a short while, Axel's duties would need to be halved. He had no set role, no more than any able-bodied sailor, and his flair for the dramatic meant that the lagging and complaining took up more time than aiding the boatswain with the rigging and climbing up to inspect one of the sails that wasn't catching the wind quite right.

Testily dismissed for the time being, he had nothing but time to kill, and there was only so long he could entertain himself by trying to keep track of that one speck on the dark horizon.

They had sailed away from Twilight Town fast, and he doubted the panic there had completely abated. There was power, in that knowledge, and he would be lying – poorly, while he was otherwise quite skilled at it – if he tried to convince anyone that he didn't enjoy it.

Just as he enjoyed that moment before they knew, when Axel could be anyone, in the eyes of a pretty boy. Just a face, not a threat. A person, who might earn his trust...or gift him with gold.

He wondered if Roxas had roused yet.

Turning his head to watch over his shoulder, he tried to guess if anyone would watch, or care, if he slipped down to the brigs. No one even looked his way.

He found Roxas awake.

They were being kept in separate cells – unsurprising, after their stint – with solid walls barring them from even being able to see one another. He only cast the briefest look over at Sora; asleep against the corner, probably having worried himself to exhaustion.
To his amusement, Roxas almost seemed to be mirroring him. His back was against the damp wall, shoved into the closest corner.

They hadn't redressed him, and his boots had been taken away. He had to be freezing right to his bones, nearly nude.

Roxas had been conscious for only a few minutes, by his count. He woke to the rocking of the ship, ankle deep in seawater, and despite the pounding in his head, had pieced together fairly quickly what happened since he'd been knocked out. He was alone, as far as he knew, with no guard in sight, but he kept his voice to a hiss as he called for Sora, just in case.

There was no way he could have known he'd just missed Sora whispering his name to no reply, before he'd worn himself into a troubled sleep. He couldn't know how close his twin was, whether he was even down here or on the ship at all. Roxas had pressed himself to the bars, ignoring all his hurts to strain his line of vision as far as he could, but there was nothing to see beyond damp walls and shadows.

It didn't take long for pain to force him to give up the search, and he'd collapsed into the wall to wait until something gave him a clue of what was to happen to him.

He didn't have to wait long.

Open eyes rose instantly to glare Axel down as he approached the cell bars, but needless to say, the look was ineffectual.

“...So,” Axel stopped several paces from the cell. “Lexaeus didn't kill you. That's good.”

Despite the glaring, Roxas had to blink before registering that Axel had spoken, the headache he'd woken with creating a ringing in his ears. “...How's the leg?” he asked aggressively.

“Won't lose it,” Axel replied, like he hadn't noticed the fight in him. “How's the head?”

Rather than give him an answer in kind, Roxas looked down towards the leg he'd stabbed with vindictive regret. “What a shame,” he muttered.

Despite the pain he was still in, Axel's lips twitched in amusement. He had brass, even locked up and helpless. “I'm sure if you'd had more time, you could've got a better hit in. Taken the leg clean off.”

“I'm usually a better shot than that.”

“I'll bet. I figure you must be better with your hands.”

Slowly, Roxas lifted his head up straight, watching Axel come a little bit closer to the bars. “Are you talking about my job at the tavern?”

“I'm talking about you,” he countered, bracing one hand against the bars and leaning into it. “You're better than that place, though.”

“You seemed like me just fine, there,” Roxas watched him closely, and didn't give too much away with his voice, apart from his immeasurable displeasure with his circumstances.

“I'd like you anywhere. Think I'm partial to you being here, actually.”
Making an unimpressed sound, Roxas turned to glare at the opposite wall.

“So cold,” Axel raised an eyebrow. “You seemed to like me, when you didn't know.”

He still didn't know. Not really.

“I liked you when you gave me a pile of gold,” Roxas objected, still glowering narrow-eyed at the stained wall, but now the faintest of grins played on his lips.

“Only the gold, hn...?”

“And you're not as bad to look at as most of my customers.” Yet he wouldn't look at Axel now, not that he could blame him for that, all things considered. Still, Axel laughed.

“...And you're the most gorgeous boy I've ever seen,” he raked his gaze over his bare skin, but they came to rest on his face most often. He liked those eyes. He loved that gold hair. “The Superior will wind up keeping you on board, can tell you that right now. You've got too much pirate in you.”

“And what makes you say that?” Roxas's cold tone was back.

“Little trick with the knife. Working your angle, getting me to bring you close to your brother.” That may have been Axel's oversight more than Roxas's skill; Saix would've argued it, that way. The fact remained that Roxas had played on a weakness of Axel's... His want to placate the pretty thing.

“Love of gold,” he continued, remembering the way he'd looked at the coin spilling on the table. “You're built for this. Could tell right away.”

To his private satisfaction, Roxas had begun to smirk in response, but practically leaped to his feet as a thought occurred to him belatedly. Surprisingly, the wound didn't seem to even slow him down.

“What have you done with Sora...?”

“You worry too much,” Axel declared. “He's alright, too.”

“Why should I believe you?” Roxas stepped towards the bars, poised for a fight and almost spitting. “You're a pirate.”

“So are you. In all but name,” Axel snickered, scrutinizing every facet of his angered expression. “I've no reason to lie about it, so...”

That he had no reason was the real lie, but his cursory glance of Sora hadn't shown any new wounds or weaknesses. The truth was always better to use, when it fortuitously lined up with what he wanted...

And once again, it was 'to placate the pretty thing'.

“Let me see him,” Roxas demanded.

“Can't. And wouldn't, if I could.” Axel's eyes almost glittered. “Last time ended with me getting a blade through my leg. You'll understand if I'm cautious.”

“I don't have to be close enough to touch him. I just want to see that he's okay. Talk to him.” Roxas
had become so tense, every line of muscle in his slender body prominent. A little closer to the light, Axel could make out every dip and curve of him, and could see that the wounds took away none of his beauty.

“It'd involve letting you out,” Axel denied him, fingertip idly tracing around the lock on his cell door. “Captain's orders.”

He scarcely had time to jerk back. Roxas threw himself to the bars with a loud clatter, fingers wrapping around them and clenching tight. The cell was solid, a strong barrier between the two of them...and perhaps it was boredom that made Axel wish it had come loose.

So little deviations to the routine, of piracy. There were thrills, to this life, to be certain, but none like the one he got from the way Roxas looked up at him – still a glare, but ever so tempting. “Let me see him,” he insisted.

Axel stepped forward again, close to the cell, intent on his face. “Let's say...” he began, voice softening to something just louder than a whisper, “...you overpower me. Force me to open the door and show you where your brother is.” He quirked his eyebrow. “What would I get?”

He couldn't overpower him, in truth. Not with nothing but a scrap of cloth... Unless he was hiding some other weapon on his person, and he dearly hoped (for Roxas's sake, not his) that he was doing no such thing.

“What does that mean – *overpower* you?” Mistrustful, he angled his face to look up at him a little more warily.

“If I, say, got a little too close,” Axel's hands slowly wrapped around the bars, just above Roxas's, but they were retracted before he had the chance to grab at him. “With the keys,” Axel elaborated. “I'd just like a little incentive to *get* the keys before I give you that chance.”

As it turned out, his captive didn't need his hands.

Roxas's leg was just thin enough to fit through the bars, and he slid it through and abruptly pinned it to Axel's hips, forcing him flush to the cell.

Axel's breath caught, becoming a purr. “God, you get sexier and sexier.”

“You should know better than to trust me this close,” Roxas hissed. “How's that for incentive?”

He grinned. “How are you going to wound me?”

“I don't need a blade to hurt you,” Roxas warned, cold skin right up against the bars. If he were taller, or Axel shorter, either one of them could have pressed just a little closer and kissed the other.

“The threats just make you all the more tempting,” Axel informed him, licking his lips slightly. It didn't back Roxas down, to his pleasure. “So, are you willing to bargain, or are we going to stand here flirting?”

“Haven't got much left to bargain with, have I?” There was a bit of knowing in his enmity, like Roxas knew damn well what was at his disposal and might please his captor, but he wasn't going to go down without a fight.
“You have what I want.”

There wasn’t a single point of contact not against the bars, now, Roxas flush to them and looking up at him with his jaw briefly set. “I think if we stood here talking long enough, I could convince you that you had no other choice but to let me out.”

“No doubt,” Axel snickered again, one hand releasing the bars to land on Roxas's leg. He gripped it and pulled, forcing Roxas off of him and starting to draw away. “That's why I plan on leaving if you aren't willing to give me what I want...”

In a flash of panic, Roxas's hand shot through the bars and grabbed the front of Axel's shirt. He didn't pull away from that. Both hands braced against the bars again, not letting Roxas pull him in any more. “Come on,” he drawled slowly. “I just want one...thing... And then I'll let you 'break out’.”

“...Break out,” he repeated cautiously, weighing what little option he had. “So I find my brother, and what happens, then?”

“That would be up to you, wouldn't it?”

He was looking for the catch. “...You would let me go free?”

“I won't lie to you, Roxas... There's nowhere to go,” Axel cautioned. “We've long left the harbour. Unless you jump ship with your brother... But, I wouldn't recommend that.”

Under his breath, Roxas cursed. He still appeared to think that captivity outside the cell was better in, and finally gave in enough to ask, “Fine. What do you want?”

Axel's lips curled, smirking and leaning in closer to the bars again. “I want...” his eyes flickered to Roxas's lips, “...to hear why you took your mask off.”

Bald-faced surprise took Roxas over. “The mask?”

“You only took it off for me,” Axel confirmed. “I want to know why.”

“How do you know you didn't just pay enough for that privilege?” he evaded.

“Because the other men offered just as much as I did, and you put it back on.”

Roxas considered another oblique answer, mulling it over for a lingering beat. In that second-long span, Axel considered drawing back again, teasing him by keeping the offer on the table, when Roxas murmured, “Your eyes.”

“My eyes...?” Axel raised an eyebrow, and he nodded.

“The money got me interested,” he explained, “but when I first saw your face... They were-...glowing.”

Axel made a soft sound, like intrigue. “I see.”

“I've heard stories about creatures that come from the sea, disguised as humans,” Roxas went on, and he was looking at Axel much the same way he did on that table with his mask pulled down. “They
can devour entire towns in a night. I didn't know if they were true.”

“...Do you think I'm one of them?” Axel started to grin, again.

“I thought you might have been,” he confessed. “You didn't turn out to be a monster, though. At least, not the fairy tale kind.”

“Mm. Just a pirate.”

Roxas's eyes narrowed distrustfully again. “They also say that the creatures make off with poor children, when all the rest are dead.”

“I guess that means you can't be sure,” Axel said.

“Your eyes are still glowing.”

His lips twitched, and he slipped away from Roxas and the bars. He was watched, as he took the keys off the high-up post they dangled from, and spun them around his finger as he came back. “I'll let you find out the truth for yourself.”

Roxas stared. He didn't expect it to be that easy. “...That's all you wanted?”

“For our deal?” Axel caught the keys against his palm. “That's all I wanted.”

It looked like Roxas wanted to ask more questions, but he thought better of pressing his luck. He took a step back, following Axel's every move. Some of the tension eked out of his shoulders at the click of the chained lock falling away.

“Your brother is the only other occupied cell. Won't be hard to find him,” he dangled the key in front of Roxas, letting it be snatched from his fingers and briefly leaning into the cell door.

It seemed to disorient Roxas briefly, to find his brother as close as he was. He got over it quickly and, wasting no time, deftly worked the lock to Sora's cell open.

“Sora,” he urged him awake, but his brother didn't rouse until he was kneeling in front of him and touching his shoulder. “Sora?”

Blue eyes dragged open tiredly. “Roxas...?”

Axel didn’t linger to see what they did after, but made his way back up to the deck. This would make things interesting for the next short while, he concluded, and the distance between the ship and the harbour would be so much prettier to look at, knowing it was the only thing keeping the brothers on board.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Uh, so... that little tag up there about the graphic violence? Yeah, that comes in during this chapter. This is your last warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sora and Roxas were out, but far from free. If Axel had been truthful about anything, it was that they had nowhere to go but deeper into the ship.

Each leaning on the other, the twins hobbled out of the brig, unnoticed. It would be some time before anyone was sent to check on the prisoners, as long as Axel kept quiet, giving them ample opportunity to make themselves lost.

There wasn't a hope of jumping ship. They couldn't survive a swim to shore with their injuries, even if they knew which direction the pirates had sailed from the harbour. All they could do was stay hidden, but it was better that than to throw themselves at the mercy of pirates.

The hull, they quickly discovered, was much larger than either of them could have guessed. More than that – it never seemed to end. In Sora's estimation, it was impossibly spacious for the ship he had seen docked at Twilight Town, but he didn't dare bring it up and break the silence they were trying to maintain. It didn't seem so important, anyway, when hiding was on their minds.

There was no lack of nooks or cracks to fit themselves in. The supply stores were full following the raid; barrels of preserved food, gunpowder, and (above all) alcohol were packed in tightly among crates of live chickens and pigs, to be slaughtered and eaten fresh by the crew. Crouching among the crates and rigging and ammunition, with the clucking and snorting of a few dozen animals to cover their steps, they could go undetected for some time.

Exhaustion was their true enemy. They slept little, resting an uneasy hour or two in shifts, and ate less. At the end of the first day, Roxas managed to break open a crate of hard tack, and they nibbled a biscuit each. They didn't chance looking for more, for fear of leaving a trail.

In whispers, they agreed to stay in the hold and never stick to one hiding spot for long. They would wait, and listen, ears pricked for any sign they were nearing dry land, or that another ship was passing by. In the meantime, they would seek out weapons – good swords, if they could be found – to defend themselves with, when the time came. The brothers didn't dare venture up on deck unarmed, even in the deepest part of the night when all sound but the heavy creaking of a ship on rough waters had ceased.

But it was slow going. Though the weapon that had torn up Roxas's side had missed anything vital, his flesh and muscle were cut deep and it slowed him terribly. Blood oozed past the stitches, forming a constant trickle down his side that stained the remains of his trousers anew every time they started to move again. His ears still rang and they had to stop and rest each time he started seeing anything more than double. Sora's wounds were less severe, and if they ever pained him, he kept his mouth shut and continued moving forward.
They could manage. It was hard, but they had to manage.

It had been three full days. The matter of blame had yet to fall on anyone's head; finding their prisoners before they could muck up the ship's workings or squirrel away supplies became Xemnas's top priority. Zexion had assured them that the brothers hadn't tossed themselves overboard, sharp nose still able to pick them out, if not narrow down their location.

One may have thought that the Captain was impressed, at first. It took particular cunning to evade his crew. The inconvenience outweighed all, though, and with the rising of a full moon, he had had enough. Nearly everyone was taken from their posts, the ship's course planned straight and obstacle-free, and no nook or cranny was to go without inspection.

Saix was obeying with relish. For someone who had known him for some time, Axel knew that was his own fault. He'd accused him of having a 'lack of focus' since the raid on the town, and had undoubtedly been entertaining the idea of tearing the twins apart like paper in order to take away the distraction.

To anyone else, though, it looked like fierce loyalty. Axel argued that if anything good had come from this, it was that.

Twelve pirates fanned out above and below deck, whispering and calling and taunting. Deep in the trappings of the hull, Roxas fought his exhaustion and listened.

Above deck, Larxene was descending spider-like from the rigging ropes, as her birds-eye view had gleaned nothing. Her hand caught Axel's, on her way back onto her feet, and it was a testament to her displeasure that she didn't linger or press the contact.

"Below deck, again?" Axel suggested dryly, privately amused by her frustration. It was out of boredom more than anything else; she wanted to find the boys purely for what would come after that.

She might not even have the patience for it, he realized, as she plucked one of her little blades from the belt slung over her hips and twirled it. "There's nowhere else to look above deck," she groused, flitting by and leaving him to follow. She continued to complain, "We've searched the hull twice over, already..."

"They're even smaller than you are. Try wedging yourself in every corner, maybe you'll find out what we're overlooking."

She gnashed her teeth at him and dropped below deck, looking about again with keen eyes.

Above them, Saix wandered slowly from the bow to stern, taking slow, deep breaths and bristling under the hoary light. He had taken over Zexion's former task, as not even his senses could match Saix's on a night like this.

The scent was strongest, where he stood. Saix's eyes opened, gazing down the portside. The saltwater nearly overtook the smell... But it was there.

"They're below," he muttered, voice almost lost to the roar of waves. Xemnas heard, however.
“...Hm,” he stood a hair's breadth away, and ghosted a hand over the back of Saix's neck in private commendation. Turning, he signalled towards the few still searching the upper deck – Demyx had been kept above and was doing nothing but distracting his superiors, anyway. “Go below deck. Have the others refine their search to portside.”

“Yes, Cap'n!” Demyx's 'searching' had been primarily from the comfort of Xigbar's arms, it seemed, being carted around like an accessory while the quartermaster did damn near nothing at all.

“You would take everyone ‘below deck’, wouldn't you, Dem?” Xigbar licked his lips and teased as Demyx slipped from his grasp. He chuckled at Demyx's weak attempt at a retaliatory strike, and watched him take off to do as he was bid.

“I would have every able-bodied man search, Xigbar,” Xemnas rebuked.

“Yeah, yeah...”

Ignoring them and inhaling deep, Saix went on ahead of Xigbar, and word spread quickly below deck.

Very softly, Sora's breath caught at the audible mass shift in movement. He searched for Roxas's eyes, willing himself silent but thinking – not for the first time – that their punishment might be less severe if they gave themselves up.

Roxas stared up at the creaking boards of the ceiling, mind working fast. If their position was compromised, there had to be somewhere they could move, some way to escape...

Fighting them wasn't an option. If they were cornered, they were done for. They were both too weakened, and even if they did evade capture a second time... What then? They'd hide some more, and hope that any injuries they'd picked up in the skirmish didn't become gangrenous?

Xigbar's indelicate steps tramped down steps above their heads, and Sora had to physically clamp a hand over his mouth to keep his surprise silent.

Roxas's heart hammered against his chest, looking for anything at all to help them hide further. Rope, suspended and tethering cannonballs in a tight hammock – if they were strong enough to hold those, surely they could hold up their weight too.

Nodding to Sora to catch his attention, he folded himself more into the dark corner and found footing to clamber up, fingers catching on the ropes and carefully – so carefully, as to not disturb the cannons and spell an end for them – hoisting himself towards the low ceiling.

The ropes strained under the added weight, and he feared he'd made a mistake.

Audibly, someone growled, “They're close.”

From behind Axel, Saix encroached upon their search with narrow eyes and flaring nostrils. Larxene ran her fingers along the hull wall, like she thought they could be blending with it somehow, but stopped and looked towards her superiors sharply at the sound of Saix's voice.

“Caught the scent?” Axel sought confirmation, and received a short nod in turn.
They were just outside the battlements, voices just enough for the brothers to hear over the creaking and slap of water against the ship, and there was nothing more for them to do than plead they'd be overlooked. Roxas clung tight to the net of thick rope, trying to keep it from swinging. If they happened to look in, his body was arranged so that the heavy munition was between himself and their line of view.

He hoped.

They were converging, though. Luxord caught Demyx's arm as he wandered without motivation, pressing a finger to his lips like he'd heard something and starting to close in. Larxene was still focusing her investigation on dark corners, behaving as though she was searching for a rat and not a pair of boys. Her head lifted and she crept over, light on her feet, when Luxord waved her over.

He'd spotted something amiss – too much bulk, up in the rope trappings, which weren't very high up by design. They couldn't be, to keep their ammunition in reach.

Sora closed his eyes tightly, subtly trying to untangle a foot caught around one of the ropes, and biting down on his lip to keep silent.

“Come on out, little boys...” Larxene sang, sneaking up on their hiding place quietly.

Demyx finally spotted what some of the others had begun to see, grabbing for Xigbar in alarm. He must have thought that was in reaction to Larxene, letting himself be pawed at and noting, “You can be one scary bitch, y'know that?”

“Quiet,” Saix commanded. Axel thought he could see his hair raising, keen for bloodshed and yearning for the moment they had the escapees in their grasp.

In the privacy of his own head, he cursed a blue streak.

Larxene stayed low, creeping up right below one of the rope hammocks with an unpleasant smile on her face. Sora's heart froze in his chest, watching her come up directly below him.

Then she craned her neck straight up and grinned, “Hello.”

“Ah-...!” Jolted, Sora tried to crawl back, shock destroying his fine motor skills and almost getting himself tangled in his scurry. Behind him, Roxas was grasping for him, hoping to help Sora free himself, but he didn't dare make a noise in case there wasn't been spotted as well yet.

“Cut them out,” Saix ordered, something dark and rough in his throat. “Damn the cannons.”

“Don't let 'em hit the ground,” Xigbar pushed at Demyx's shoulders at once.

“Uh-... The cannonballs or the prisoners-?”

“As if, leave the prisoners to us.”

Sora struggled to escape the threat of daggers and capture, but Larxene was giggling wildly, grabbing him by the kicking legs and pulling hard. The leg went right down, pelvis catching on ropes and smarting badly, but Sora didn't care. Panicked, he just tried to throw her off, kick her, anything.
The blade came up and caught on the rope, sawing through and nearly cutting flesh.

“Sora!”

Luxord had found Roxas and was engaged in much the same struggle, but appeared happy to abandon his efforts once Sora hit the floor, all violent limbs and terrified shouts. Luxord grabbed him, leaving Larxene to deal with cutting or wrestling Roxas, given the obvious delight she took in it.

She didn’t get the chance – Roxas went after his brother, dropping onto the floor and lunging straight at the two of them. “Don't you dare.”

He choked. He’d been cut off by Saix’s clawed hand on his throat, and hauled up off his feet. His hands scrambled to pull at Saix’s, but he was unrelenting, uncaring if he really wound up strangling the boy.

“Tie them up. Make sure they can't run again,” he threw the order at everyone, and Axel could see in the flexed lines of his muscles that it was taking Saix a great deal of willpower not to simply tear Roxas apart. Joyfully.

He made no move to obey – the others were on top of that – and put his efforts into pretending he wasn't tense. “What'll we do with them?”

“Captain wanted them on deck,” Demyx supplied, providing the lengths of rope to avoid getting too close to thrashing limbs. Larxene gleefully bound Sora, tying his ankles together to render his kicking useless and none-too-gently manhandling him, with Luxord's willing assistance, to bind his hands and arms.

Xigbar looked to be relishing the task just as much, tying up Roxas with a lascivious smirk on his rugged face. For a moment, it looked like Roxas might spit at him, or Saix, in defiance...but his gaze found Axel, and for a second, it became almost pleading instead.

For reasons not even he could identify, Axel tried to think of something he could do for him. They’d made it so much longer than he thought they would; it seemed a shame to have it end, here. He wondered if they'd be killed for this, determined to not be worth their trouble.

What a waste that would be.

Sora, who was being hauled up over Luxord's shoulder, had no choice but to keep still or burn himself by struggling against the too-tight ropes. Roxas hissed as he received the same treatment, but his stillness seemed more forced than out of better judgement.

Saix allowed the others to move on ahead of him, giving Axel a meaningful look before he brought up the end of the procession. Axel kept near him.

They already associated Axel with the escape. Whatever had happened, in their eyes, Axel was undoubtedly linked to the boys from the moment he'd decided he wanted to lead a raid, in Twilight Town.

“You did emphasize the fact that these are crafty prisoners, to the Captain?” Axel dropped his voice to the softest register he could still be heard, in. “That whatever happened to lead to their escape... It
“Was an accident?”

“Should he have any reason to believe otherwise?” Saix retorted.

“You never know. Prisoners lie.”

“Hm.” Saix slanted his gaze towards his co-conspirator, but there would be no attempt to defend him. Axel could see it written all over his face. “If there is nothing to be suspicious of, then I'm sure the truth will come to light.”

He was sore over his suspicions. This didn't bode well.

“Of course,” Axel sounded breezy. He slung an arm over Demyx's shoulders like he didn't have a care in the world once they were back on deck, watching the boys being unceremoniously dropped in front of their captain.

Xemnas stood tall, looking down at them and giving nothing of his own inclinations away. Unlike Saix, who radiated violence, it was impossible to determine what was happening in the Superior's head, what consequence he may have concocted for them.

Sora's eyes flickered to Roxas, mind a fearful blank and relying on him – or hoping that he could – to have some kind of plan stored away. His brother's glare had settled on Axel, and he didn't know what that meant. Was he trying to communicate something to the pirate? Threaten him?

“As predicted, the prisoners never abandoned the ship,” Saix circled, bringing himself back to the Superior. Xemnas looked between them, coming to a rest on Sora. Less angry; less defiant. Weaker, to his appraisal.

“You.”

Sora looked up at him, steeling himself, determined not to show any sign of intimidation.

“Tell me how you escaped,” Xemnas bid, “and I recommend you be truthful in your answer. Your punishment will be...less, if you are honest.”

Sora had no reason to think he was telling the truth, but there didn't seem to be a point to lying anyway.

Not when he wasn't certain how Roxas had gotten out of his cell. He'd treated it as an unimportant detail, and Sora didn't press the issue.

“We... We worked together,” he answered, too unclear and uncertain to satisfy Xemnas.

“A vague answer will not save you,” Xemnas turned his piercing stare on Roxas. “Tell me. Directly.”

Any ideas of withholding information only lasted for a split-second. There was no reason to protect a pirate, with all that had happened to them. Roxas jutted his chin in Axel's direction, unhesitating, “It was him.”

“Captain -”
Axel had expected that.

“Not a word,” Xemnas scowled. “I suspected as much. I had gathered you were following the shortsighted impulses of your libido, but I did hope your self-preservation would keep you clever.”

He’d expected that, too, but it was no less of a shame that he couldn’t try to talk his way around it. Axel silenced, watching Lexaeus come forward and haul Roxas up, first. Xemnas folded his arms, informing him, “You'll share in their punishment.”

Larxene cackled, and covered it poorly.

“Roxas!” Sora fought to lift himself off the deck, watching Lexaeus haul him to the massive mast. Roxas's heart was hammering, hating that he could be plucked off the floor and carried like he was weightless, wondering if their punishment was really going to be any less severe for accusing Axel.

Xigbar 'helped' Sora up, the struggling ceasing for the span of a breath. “Shame to ruin that nice shirt, isn't it?” he leered, pulling the ropes off him and tearing at his shirt to follow. Sora jerked, trying to free himself, but he was tethered to the mast too quickly.

“Five lashes each, Saix,” Xemnas turned away, sauntering past Larxene, who could no longer contain her giggles.

“Hold on.”

Xemnas paused, fixing Axel with a glare. “That includes you, yes.”

“Not arguing with you, Captain,” Axel amended, and once again he needed to play it to hide the tension up his back. He knew Saix's strength. He knew what it was, on a night like this one, and how he could cut through flesh right to the bone if he so desired.

And he knew damn well that Saix wanted that, badly.

“Let me give it to them,” he requested, almost casually. “Makes sense, doesn't it? I let 'em out, I'll be the one.”

“It appears his lust has confused him into becoming sympathetic,” Saix's eyes were narrow, accusatory.

“Sympathy?” Axel echoed with a bark of laughter. “You've got it wrong. I just think I should be the one to do it. Revenge for him outing me, when he was the one seducing me in the first place.”

“Then Saix can be the one to give your lashings,” Xemnas took a few more steps, turning back around to view his prisoners' protests. They were both struggling, now, and shouting over the crew's jeers.

“Let me take Roxas's!” Sora pulled at the ropes, cutting into the circulation at his wrists, desperately bargaining with the Captain who didn't look to even be listening.

Saix glowered at Axel. He saw right through him, but he would not argue with the Captain. “You should give theirs now,” he growled through gritted teeth. “Before you're too weak to do it.”

Axel nodded with a smirk, accepting the thick whip from Larxene – unsurprising, that she was the
one to fetch it when normally they would have had Demyx run such an errand. If Marluxia had been on-deck, no doubt he would have grabbed it even quicker, but his duties were more important than even this.

Their eleventh member would be so disappointed that he missed watching Axel's back being torn to shreds, he irritably reflected.

Why he was even bothering to put himself between Saix and these boys was beyond him; he had never been the sort to throw himself on a sword for someone else's sake.

Perhaps he just hated the idea of seeing something so pretty ruined, before he'd even had a chance to properly enjoy it.

“Please!” Sora yelled again, “Leave Roxas alone!”

Roxas, on the other hand, just snarled at all of them.

“Speak again, and you will both take five more,” Xemnas had lowered his voice to a dangerous tone, and even through the racket, Sora could hear him. They'd all heard, and it wrested more boisterous whoops from the sadistic members of the audience. “As it is, you'll take them first.”

Demyx gravitated towards Xaldin, seizing his arm and distracting their sailing master. The wide, entertained sneer was still on his face, but he crushed Demyx to his chest to keep him from having to watch.

He should have slipped away when Zexion did, he lamented.

Unable to breathe, Roxas focused on Sora, forcing himself not to look away. Fists clenched and eyes closed, Sora tried to inhale as well but found his throat too tight.

Taking his position behind Sora, Axel calculated – how much of a swing, how lightly could he hit him, how obvious would it be to Saix that he wasn't trying very hard to hurt him? - and the whip cracked as it lashed across Sora's back.

It seared, making Sora hiss and drop his forehead against the mast to brace against the pain.

The strike should have cut right through the skin, but the rip was minor. The bleeding was scarce, oozing from the scarlet strip rather than spray. Saix growled.

Axel went fast, counting out each lash. The second hit intersected with the first, deeper across Sora's shoulder blade. By the time he was finished, regardless of his strength, there were droplets of blood against the deck and his victim's entire body was shuddering. The fifth had made him sink against the mast, breathing out at long last and trying not to let a whimper escape. His wrists were being untied, but if fighting was on his mind, he was left too weak to do much of it before he was grappled still by Luxord. He nearly collapsed into him, legs badly shaking.

Lexaeus gave over Roxas to Xigbar, who was happy to manhandle him into Sora's place. Raw, burning pain still wracking his body, Sora could only watch numbly with watering eyes as the rope wrapped around the mast and dug into Roxas's forearms, just as they'd done to him.

“Get him help, please!” Roxas broke his resentful silence to shout, neck craning to keep his gaze trained on Sora. No one even acknowledged his plea.
The whip was taken abruptly out of Axel's grip, replaced with another and accompanied by a fierce look. Saix's eyes burned, handing it to him with a low warning, “If I see you taking pity on the prisoner, I will take over immediately.”

Hand wrapping firmly around the handle, Axel raised an eyebrow at Saix. As he turned himself towards Roxas, he gave a quick glance to the whip. Moonlight caught on the metal fragments embedded in the weapon and made them glint. They were sure to do a better job of breaking skin, on contact, and he swore inside the safety of his own head.

The untidy line of scabbed stitches in Roxas's side... Those were sure to break open, too.

“Hope you warmed up on this one,” Luxord called as he looked over Sora's wounds, the boy still listless in his arms. “You can do better than that, can't you?”

“Just help him,” Roxas grunted, turning his head away at last.

“Got some nerve in him, this one, demandin' shit from pirates,” Xigbar taunted him, and stepped away. The berth was clear, and the longer Axel waited, the sooner Saix would shove him out of the way.

The whip swished ominously before it snapped across Roxas's back, and Demyx buried his face vigorously into Xaldin.

Roxas managed not to make a sound. His back arched, but the split across it bloomed bloody, a streak of red painting the rest of the rest of the way down.

Saix finally looked pleased.

The second lash sent droplets spraying across the boots of anyone too near, and the third created a thin river down Roxas's back. Axel only paused after the fourth, rubbing his wrist lightly with a short exhale of air, and wondered how the tortured boy was managing to stand at all. Roxas's knees had locked, leaving him shaking rigidly like a tree against a stiff breeze, but he still hadn't yet yelled or let tears fall. He was breathing much harder, eyes watering with the threat of tears, lip almost bitten through...but he wouldn't give a bunch of pirates the satisfaction.

Stubborn, Axel thought, with a glimmer of something like pride, and launched the whip again.

The distraction and the minute of recuperation had rekindled Sora's fire, though, if not his ability to think clearly. Before the final blow had landed, Sora slipped out of Luxord's grasp, diving at Xemnas unarmed.

It was a short-lived rebellion. He was struck to the floor in the same instant the crack sang through the air.

The laughter died quickly, Xemnas's heel stamping down on Sora's ribs, diverted from the display and staring down at his attacker, instead. “That was...unwise.”

Axel tilted his head, staring at the two of them with incredulity – what had Sora been trying to accomplish with a move like that?

Nearly every weapon was drawn, around them. Xaldin had his lance aimed like he could spear Sora.
right through, if he so desired, even with his arm still locked around Demyx; Larxene's daggers were ready, Xigbar's guns cocked.

Sora clawed at Xemnas's leg, voice strained, “Evil-...dirty pirates-...”

He couldn't quite figure out what was going on, tethered and burning under his open wounds, but his brother's panic made Roxas pull at the ropes again, trying to turn to see. “You-...” he gasped, his struggles making his blood flow faster.

“Axel,” Xemnas kept his foot down.

He knew again, what he was going to say.

“Give the brother five more lashings.”

“No!” Roxas panicked. “Let me take them, he's only -”

“You misunderstand,” Xemnas cut him off, and put more of his weight against his heel. “I was talking about you.”

Sora's eyes widened. The rough surface of the deck was making his bleeding back scream, he could feel his rib cage straining and creaking ominously under Xemnas's weight, but he only thought of Roxas at that moment and tried to beg, “Please...”

“Captain, if I may,” Saix's hands were still hooked like claws, hair on end like a feral thing, but stepping forward with a collected aura. “I believe the problem arose from keeping these two together in the first place.”

Something like a smirk reached Xemnas's eyes, but not his lips. “I couldn't agree more. Axel, I do mean now.”

Axel's gaze slanted towards the lines on Roxas's back. There was nowhere he could hit that wouldn't wound him even more seriously. The broken skin was raised, blood still seeping through muscle -

“Too much hesitation, Axel,” the whip was yanked out of his grip, Saix pushing him aside.

“I wasn't-...” Axel was jolted, arguing. “I was just about to -”

“Your Captain was attacked, and you were 'just about to'? Xemnas repeated coolly. “I am...disappointed.”

“Shall I remind you of what happens if you become 'distracted'? Saix met Axel's eyes. It sounded as though he was echoing the Superior's sentiment, but there was meaning in those narrow pupils that only he could recognize.

Axel ground his teeth together and stepped aside.

“Five more lashes,” Xemnas reiterated his order with failing patience. “Saix, proceed.”

Lips curled back over sharp canines, Saix pulling the whip back with all his strength and bringing it down viciously.
Roxas cried out, this time. The skin was already torn, but the whip cleaved through like there was no resistance to be met – he thought he could feel it in his chest, through his organs. This could kill him.

Sora tried that much harder to escape Xemnas, to no avail. He could scarcely move at all without someone's weapon jabbing into his skin.

Demyx's stomach turned at another agonized scream, shaking his head stiffly to when Xaldin made a leering offer to take him below deck. A rain of blood was sent farther, now – Saix would not be satisfied until he truly parted flesh from bone, cracking the whip down and down again.

Axel didn't flinch, but cursed himself for each strike. His fault, for hesitating.

Xemnas counted out five strikes, deeply satisfied with Saix's brutality over Axel's weaker punishments, and plainly smug as he removed his foot from Sora's chest at last. He could still scarcely move without inviting death, but Xemnas didn't think he would even try. “Do you still intend to fight? Or should Saix add another five?”

Sora trembled, watching blood pool on the deck below Roxas. He'd buckled, only the ropes holding his arms above his head.

“I won't,” he whispered.

“I thought not,” Xemnas crooked a finger towards Xigbar, eyes still fixed on the brunette twin. “...Throw this one overboard.”

Roxas's head jerked, voice ragged. “What -”

“Always savin' the dirty work for me,” Xigbar grabbed Sora while he was stunned, hauling him up and starting to drag him over to the closest side.

“You two prove to be far more inconvenient, kept together,” Xemnas spoke, watching Roxas out of a desire to see him fight. He was doing just that, again, despite his weakness, rapidly losing both blood and vision. Everything was swimming, blackening, but Sora, he had to get to Sora, he had to fight for Sora -

Demyx lifted his head, gazing at the waters and uneasily determining them to be especially rough, tonight.

“Are you sure, Captain?” Axel thought fast. “You could use them against each other. They'll cooperate, if you keep them both around.”

“Saix is right,” Xemnas sounded disgusted. “You're beginning to show far too much sympathy.”

“Little help?” Xigbar shot at Xaldin, only partially to combat Sora's pitiful thrashing and mostly to keep him from touching Demyx more, purely out of pettiness.

“S-stop this! Wait! P-put us back in the cells!” Sora almost shrieked, trying alternately to kick at both men and dig his heels into the deck, panicking as they dragged him ever closer to the side.

“Sora-...” Roxas pulled with whatever strength he had left, against the ropes, but his wrists only bled from the attempt, scratched and sore. “You heartless pirates...!”
Larxene laughed wildly.

“He's too weak to fight,” Xemnas observed, directing that to Lexaeus. “Prepare Axel for his punishment.”

He was shoved forward slightly by the shoulder, but Axel felt strangely disconnected from it, allowing Lexaeus to pull him forward and removing his own shirt before it could be sliced off by Larxene.

Roxas managed to keep his feet when he was released, but as he put one foot forward all the strength went out of him and he dropped to one knee, then onto all fours. He pushed himself up stubbornly, but it was like fighting against a raging current with limbs made of lead. He swayed badly as he attempted to sit up – crawl over to them, drag himself, anything -

Sora was shoved carelessly over the edge, and the distant splash was the only thing Roxas could hear.

“No!"

The world became a black haze, for Roxas, and he fell motionless.

Cold, strong waves ploughed over him, water rushing away from the hull and carrying Sora very far very fast, before he could be crushed under the ship. Salt water seared his back, spraying into his open mouth as it forced a scream from him, but his voice was lost to the waves and the wind.

Xigbar and Xaldin both turned away, more interested in the whipping and laughing at the unconscious boy sprawled in his own blood, but Demyx didn't stop staring at the water.

“Bind the boy again. He'll be locked up until I decide otherwise,” Xemnas commanded, already moving on to the next order of business. Lexaeus hadn't bound Axel quite so tightly as the prisoners had been tied, but there was really no need. Axel wouldn't try to go anywhere.

His hands flexed, then clenched, stealing a look at Roxas as he was lifted up like a rag doll and his abraded wrists were tied together again.

“Proceed, Saix.”

Axel closed his eyes, and hissed as the whip cracked hot across his back.

It wasn't as hard as it could have been. The five were clean and over fast. The aggression had mostly been taken out on Roxas, and of everyone on board, Saix was most likely to treat him mercifully. As mercifully as he knew how, in any case.

Larxene's cheers were loudest of all, the crew parting to allow Xemnas to approach his subordinate. “Perhaps a night behind bars may do you some good as well, Axel. To serve as a reminder.”

Axel's eyes dragged open, and found Xemnas right next to him. The Superior's eyes were narrow, and his voice dropped to a warning mutter, “If you take any action against me again...”

He managed a weak smirk. “Never happen, Cap'n...”

Saix's hand dragged down the whip, letting blood collect in his palm before flicking it carelessly onto
the ground to pool with the rest. He eyed his handiwork as he passed the whip off to Larxene. At the first indication of being called to him, though, he was at Xemnas's side, and the Captain announced, “Dismissed.”

Lexaeus was still removing Axel's bindings, letting them drop before accepting the Captain's dismissal. Axel slumped against the mast briefly, using it to right himself.

“Will I need to have Saix escort you?” Xemnas appeared unimpressed, patronizing.

A test. Axel shook his head, raising his eyebrows and covering up his pain. “No, but I could always use the company.”

It earned him vague irritation. “Take him to a cell,” Xemnas ordered shortly.

“Hn,” Saix caught him by the arm and dragged him along. Axel almost tripped, stumbling before regaining his footing; he rather needed the forceful 'help' just to be able to move at more than a snail's pace. Neither of them spoke again, until they were below deck and nearly to the brig.

“Sympathy?” Axel hissed. “You think I'm going soft?”

“You seem oddly distracted by the prisoner,” Saix growled softly, not letting them be heard. “I have never known you to be so...anxious to help.”

“I'm not helping. I'm playing,” he scowled. “I'll find something else to keep me entertained, if it bothers you so much...”

“Your playthings have never put so much at stake for you.” Saix's claws dug into his arm. “Do not forget your purpose.”

A cell door was wrenched open, and Axel was steered inside, all too ready to drop. He found his purchase against the bars the second they were locked, watching Saix with half-lidded eyes as the other man turned and put the key up out of reach.

“I won't,” he called after him, and got the slam of a door in response.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading, especially those who have left kudos or comments.

Just a heads up - we're making Mondays our updating day. It works best for our schedules and we hope it brings a little enjoyment to what is generally considered the worst day of the week.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, once again – this chapter contains some fairly graphic/upsetting depictions of injuries and medical procedures. Unsafe whipping is no fun, kids!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Inside a windowless cell, there was very little to indicate that the sun had risen. Only the faintest stream of sun broke through the cracks in the door to cast bright streaks on the stairs, then were swallowed by the bleak torchlight.

Axel lay flat on his stomach, wounds left to the mercy of the open air until Zexion could treat them – as he inevitably would, Axel was sure, for their Superior required his crew to be in fit enough shape to be useful.

It was more than he could say for Roxas. He'd watched them bring him in, last night, and simply dump him in a cell to waste. With a solid wall between them, he couldn't see how Roxas was faring, and lamented that he couldn't get a good look.

He wondered if he'd woken, yet.

On the other side of the cell wall, Roxas stirred – not for the first time. Every time before had been extremely short-lived, pain knocking him flat into blackness. The occasional leak of salt water to his wounds might have made him scream, had he the strength for even that, and he was sticky with more blood than he'd ever seen.

He should have been dead. He'd nearly been flayed. For now, he just couldn't move, a weak groan wrested from him as this bout of consciousness stuck.

Axel dragged himself to the front of his cell, bearing the pain clawing up his back with only a sharp inhale to show for it. He draped himself against the bars, thin enough to slide his arms around them, and pressed his cheek right to them in a weak attempt to glimpse into the cell beside him.

It was a fruitless endeavor, but something told him Roxas was waking up.

Roxas flexed his muscles to test them, hissing when his attempts only punished himself.

“T'll see if I can convince Zexion or Vexen to heal you,” Axel called to him, sounding unsympathetic despite the offer. “In the meantime, you shouldn't try to move.”

Carefully, Roxas turned to his head to the side, towards the speaker still blocked from view. He knew who it was, regardless. “What d'you care?” he slurred, pain making his thoughts sluggish and everything else just as slow.

“I have reasons. Maybe.”
“You got whipped too,” Roxas's eyes closed tiredly. He remembered that much of the night before. There was something more, something he wasn't wrapping his head around, but the searing throbbing along his back circumvented every attempt to think.

“Yeah,” Axel drawled. “Don't think I'm not angry about that.”

“You gave me the key.”

“Yeah. I did.”

“So it's not my fault,” Roxas concluded.

Axel lifted one eyebrow, lamenting that Roxas couldn't see the exact expression on his face, as his tone was a tad too tired to really convey his sarcasm. “Alright, sure. It's not your fault. That makes everything better. For everyone.”

“I hurt a little less, already,” Roxas shot back dryly, face sinking against the grimy floor.

“I'm so glad,” Axel rolled his eyes.

Roxas barely heard him. His eyes opened again, but his vision swam, so he was quick to shut them to keep the world somewhat steady. “'Re you banished now?”

“Just punished. Part of the crew... You don't get banished.” With the way Axel sank into the bars, it looked as though he was trying to melt into them, weaker than he wanted to let on. “Lucky me.”

“Banished,” Roxas mumbled, mind mulling that word over and over again until it meant something else.

And then he remembered.

“Sora-!” Weakness and pain cast aside, Roxas's eyes flew open, trying to push himself up off the ground.

“Yeah,” Axel grew quieter. “Sorry, about your brother.”

Roxas's vision went completely black for a second, shaking arms giving out before he'd even really lifted himself. He swallowed the burgeoning lump in his throat, processing everything from last night; the wild water, the pitch blackness miles around. No shore, no ships. Nothing that might have saved him.

His heart felt cold. “There's no hope for him, is there?”

Axel watched the wall, and wished he could actually see him. “…I don't know. Probably not,” he replied, not about to lie in this instance.

“He can swim, but...but not forever...” Roxas pulled his arm with difficulty, bringing his face into one of his hands and pressing against it. The pressure didn't alleviate his dizziness, nor did it take away the vivid picture he was painting. Sora, fighting the currents, until he was too weak to resist being pulled under the water... “Oh god...”

Axel was at a loss. Roxas was only a prisoner, to him, despite any and everything... But, it felt
wrong to simply stay silent. “There are worse ways to die,” he said, at last. “I know that's not much comfort, but...Xemnas could have done a lot worse.”

“I never should have broken him out,” Roxas was breathing heavier, audible from Axel's cell. “I shouldn't have taken the chance... At least waited 'til we were on land...”

“We restocked,” Axel shook his head. “We won't be going back to land for weeks. Cap'n would have killed you both, in that time.”

Roxas grit his teeth. “How could you possibly-...” he stopped himself short, and turned accusing, “All you are is some pirate.”

“Is that all I am?” Axel snorted.

“You let it happen. Just like the rest.”

“Hn,” Axel slunk away from the bars, holding himself upright as his back smarted and burned. “Could've sworn I had whip marks, too.”

“But you'd let it happen to someone else. Someone innocent,” Roxas scowled, heart starting to pick up again in anger. “You said I have pirate in me, but I would never be something as disgusting as that.”

“You let it happen to me,” Axel countered. “Wouldn't have, if you hadn't turned me in.”

“And you got to handle the whip, in return,” Roxas hissed.

“How strong do you think I am?”

The question seemed to come from nowhere, a hitch in Roxas's building ire. Anger was easier to bear than sorrow, but both were interrupted by uncertainty.

“I don't know...” Roxas's brow furrowed. “Strong enough to throw that...bladed circle, at me.”

“Then why didn't I cut through your back the way Saix did?”

Silence, for a second. “You want me to still be desirable.”

Axel laughed, the sound sharp. “I have marks on my face, Roxas, scars wouldn't put me off.”

'Roxas'. He'd called him Roxy, back in the tavern, but he'd paid enough attention to learn his name. In a surreal, manic moment, Roxas felt the beginnings of a grin stirring. “You were listening to Sora.”

“What can I say. I'm interested.”

Shakily, Roxas let out a slow sigh, every 'high' feeling ebbing away until he was wrapped up in pain, again. “Doesn't matter, now,” he muttered. “He's gone. I'm not likely to last, like this.”

“Unless you give in to your more...pirate-like tendencies.”

He didn't deem that worthy of an answer. Roxas kept his eyes closed, groaning with every rock of
the ship that strained his torn-apart back.

“Just think it over,” Axel stretched out against the bars again, narrow eyes contemplative behind the irritation. “It isn't a bad life, you know.”

Roxas's scowl deepened, and blocked Axel's voice out with the only thing his mind could muster; a cruel and constant replay of Sora's screams, before he hit the water.

The night had been long. Somewhere, leagues ahead, an entire crew was in the throes of sadistic celebration, while a ship of militant sailors simply weathered out the rough waters while traveling as fast as they dared to go.

In spite of the weariness making his limbs and eyes ache, Riku did not allow himself the luxury of real privacy. The doors to his quarters were unlocked, in the event that he was needed for any reason... And, if the last twenty-four hours were anything to go by, something would come up. It could have been hazing, for all the respect the crew was showing him – some of their questions could have been answered by the quartermaster, or less.

If he was going to instill any sense of respect in them, they could not see him weak, and he would not close his door to them.

Closing his eyes, he took advantage of the reprieve and began his rest. So late at night, he could leave the Highwind's operation in the hands of a skeleton crew. Most of his men would be sleeping; it was quiet, apart from the howl of wild wind and the rough seas on this night.

Amidst the churning, far below deck, a small figure clung to consciousness, locked-up fingers tinged blue and clutching a small piece of driftwood. It barely kept him afloat, the waves frequently overtaking Sora's head and filling his lungs with salt.

He wasn't so close to the ship. If it wasn't for a keen-eyed lookout and a hyper-vigilant crew, he would have passed right by.

Riku's eyes flew open, jerked from almost-sleep, at the sound of a bell clanging.

A signal, for 'man overboard'.

He was on his feet again, coat grabbed off the bedpost and hat left behind. He pulled the jacket on as he went for the door, exiting straight out onto the deck and striding towards the small congregation of uniformed men.

He was met by grudging salutes and a report, “Ours are accounted for, Captain – not our man.”

“Does it matter?” Riku held his hand out for the spyglass to look for the man, scanning the water with trained speed. The bobbing figure was hard to make out, but was getting closer to the ship. “Get me a lifeboat, I'll go myself.”

It wasn't the safest course of action, on a night like this, but no one was going to argue with him. There were mutters of 'Yes, Captain' as they hopped to it, and Riku all but bolted to get down to the surface.
Sora's fingers, rigid as they were around the driftwood, were starting to lose their grip. He'd begun to slip from his lifeline, but it wasn't in him to care. The agony of his back had numbed, and all he knew was cold. It was darker than night, eyes closed and head emptied, and the last bit of self-preservation was starting to leave him.

Unable to even feel it when he choked, anymore, he stopped fighting the closure of his throat, and slipped under the water.

Hands plunged below the surface and grabbed at him, before he could sink beyond reach.

Something like a switch went off in Sora's mind. One last burst, recognizing that something was happening, something that meant he had to try. He gripped onto the arms that were hauling him, kicking up splashes of frigid water as Riku, entire torso now sopping wet, pulled him over the side of his boat.

Having the boy halfway overtop of him only soaked him more, but Riku hardly noticed. He was checking his pulse, then his breathing – shallow, difficult, but present. He was alive. “Stay conscious,” he urged, hand sliding along Sora's frozen neck. “You're alright...”

Perhaps he would be, but right then, his skin was sickly blue. To Riku's relief, he started to cough violently, spitting out water with whatever strength he still had.

A remarkable amount, to have survived so long.

He kept Sora in his lap, letting him leech whatever body heat he had to spare, rowing hard back to his anchored ship. His arms were aching with every stroke of the oars, having rowed so hard to reach Sora in time, but he didn't slow down on his way back. Sora was going to catch his death of cold, if he didn't get him on-board and seen to, fast.

The rope was thrown to him and he immediately began looping it so that they could haul the boat back up. Riku was intent, missing the way Sora's eyes began to open at last, trying to get a good look at his saviour and what was happening.

It was hard to speak. Still, Sora tried. “Wh... Who...”

The boat swayed and creaked as it was lifted from the water. Riku let out a short breath, starting to remove his wet coat – it was all he had that might do – to throw over Sora's bare chest. He noted the open eyes, perhaps without even having heard him. “You're going to be alright.”

“Who...” Sora tried again.

“Captain of the Highwind. Call me Riku,” he craned his neck upwards to see how close they were to the deck. “I'll have our medic look at you... We'll get you warm, and you'll be fine.”

Another attempt at speaking made him hack up more seawater, but he managed after a moment. “What... What kind of ship is that?”

“...A warship,” he answered, and the boat was lugged up onto the deck at last. More sailors were on-deck, now, having been wakened and called to attention by the bell.

“Help him,” Riku instructed, getting out of the boat once they'd lifted Sora and were holding him up.
He looked like he might pass out, now that the immediate danger was over, undoubtedly delirious with exhaustion. “Take him to see the medic, and round up some proper clothing, the warmer the better.”

Weakly, Sora caught onto Riku's arm, not quite managing a hold. Interrupted and surprised, Riku stared at him, but didn't jerk out of his loose grasp.

“S-Sora.”

Riku almost didn't hear him. Sora went limp, the final exertion of speaking robbing him of the last dregs of energy, and he almost pulled Riku and the two crewmen holding him up down with him.

He was unconscious. Riku lurched forward, other arm catching him around the waist and pulling him upwards while they all regained their footing.

“Steady, Captain, we've got him,” one of his men said, and they adjusted their hold to carry him off to sick bay.

Riku watched them go, starting to really feel the cold sink under his skin. He needed to go warm himself, change from his dripping shirt...

But he'd need to check on the rest of the crew, first, and let them know they were dismissed.

“'Sora'...?” Riku murmured to himself, and went about his duties.

Axel's release from the brig didn't come for several days. Conversation was scarce, out of Roxas's unwillingness to indulge a pirate any further; they had cost him enough, and he didn't much care to throw whatever dignity he maintained on top of that pile. He had no way of knowing if Axel was being fed better, but chances were good that he was getting more. Meals were dropped just inside the bars, and Roxas couldn't muster the strength to drag himself over to them. Sometimes they were close enough to reach, to drag over, but those times were not frequent enough.

He would waste away to nothing, down here. Roxas had started to resign himself, to that.

Axel's freedom was not the last he saw of him, though, and it had scarcely been an hour – he thought, as time was difficult to keep track of, down here – before there were two pairs of footsteps approaching the cells.

“You'll patch him up real good. Else, I might go tell Xemnas you're going against his orders.”

“On your behalf,” an adenoidal voice snapped at Axel. Roxas may have lifted his head to glimpse the speaker, if he were processing the words they were saying. He'd nearly drifted off, the brig somehow colder than he'd grown accustomed to over the past few days.

Axel's knuckles rapped against the metal bars, creating enough of a clatter to prevent him from actually falling asleep and ignore whatever his 'visitors' were down here for.

“You'd better not be expecting much,” Vexen's expression curdled, looking down his nose at Roxas with utter distaste. The infection up his back was obvious and repulsive, and the stink was terrible, as it only could be from several days' worth of waste and rot.
It would require thorough cleaning before he could even perform basic surgery.

“Roxas,” Axel crooned, knocking against the bars louder. Roxas began to lift his head, a snarl wrested from his throat, which only made Axel grin. “C’mon, Roxy. Acting like that will make me think you aren’t happy to see me.”

Vexen’s sharp shoulder collided with him, nudging Axel out of his way with a glower. “Get me the keys, and be quick about it.”

“You came back quick for a prisoner,” Roxas growled at Axel’s back, watching him retrieve the key ring from its post. “Who’s he? What are you doing?”

“Vexen’s one of our medics. Capable, for what you’d find on a ship. He doesn’t only amputate,” Axel smirked, coming to unlock the cell. “He’s going to fix your back.”

“Nothing funny,” Vexen's lip curled, stepping into the cell once the door opened. “We might have you flogged again.”

“As you can see, I'm in the state to do something funny,” Roxas shot back bitterly, covering his surprise. He wouldn't have believed for an instant that Axel bore any real concern for him, ulterior motives or not.

“And do be silent,” Vexen knelt, expression all the more sour and muttering with the air of blaming Axel. The kit he was holding was placed down gingerly, like he thought it would be destroyed by the dirtiness of the floor. “A table would be far too practical... It's disgusting, having to work in these conditions...”

Something like ice ran down his back, leaving a numb streak in its wake, and making Roxas gasp.

“The hell-”

Axel leaned into the open cell door and watched Vexen leave thin trails of frost around the inflamed skin, using nothing more than his fingertips. Vexen worked quickly, adopting some professionalism at last but maintaining enough spite to spit at Axel, “Do be useful. Get me supplies from my bag.”

“You'd better be numbing him properly,” Axel slipped into the cell, and despite the sting of ice Roxas could have sworn the air warmed. His voice was stuck in his throat; he wanted to ask questions, and tried to watch Axel without moving his head.

“Don't question me, Axel. I know exactly what I'm doing, whereas you never seem aware of even your own actions, much less anyone else’s.”

“Cutting,” Axel removed one needle, pressing it between his fingertips and letting them run hot.

“What is he doing?!’ Roxas demanded, strangled.

“Just numbing the wounds, Roxas, calm down. Nearly done?” Axel hushed him, crouching in front of Roxas.

Vexen made an irritated sound, grabbing a bottle from his bag when it appeared that Axel had no intention of fetching it for him.
“Do not rush me. These wounds need cleaning before I can do anything more. This infection ought to have killed him, by now.”

Roxas felt a tiny stab of panic in his heart, but the fact that he hadn't died yet meant his curiosity still ran stronger than worry. “Yes, but what...”

The icy feeling had withdrawn. Even prickling with numbness, he could feel that. He scowled up at Axel's face, the picture of patronizing amusement, until he couldn't bear to look at him any longer. He would get no answers from him.

“Never mind,” he grumbled.

Vexen went on with his work, needing to dig into the wound to drain the pus and bending close to ensure he was thorough. Axel didn't interrupt, letting Roxas avoid meeting his gaze but using the opportunity to study him intently.

“We'll sit him up once I'm done with his lower back,” Vexen informed Axel. “I can't work like this, sitting like a hunchbacked thing...”

Axel made a noncommittal sound, watching Vexen work along the still-deep slashes. Several times, Roxas was afraid the numbness would wear off, but wasn't sure if the pain would be worse than the cold. He had to fight not to shiver, dreading more damage might be done to his back if he shook too much.

Whatever Vexen had used to numb him in the first place, though... It was holding strong, rekindled by freezing-cold fingers.

“Lift him,” Vexen said at last, when the thread had laced through the skin of his lower back. The gashes had been sewn back together with difficulty, and even through the ice, Roxas could feel that.

It was a better pain than the one he'd been experiencing for days, though. His skin felt tight and raw, inside... It was preferable.

Axel's warm hands hoisted him up, using his own body to prop him up. His shoulder blades were being attended to, deserving more of his focus than Axel, but it was far more difficult than before to pretend as though he didn't exist.

Even worse, when Axel caught his chin and tilted it up.

Stubbornly, Roxas's eyes tried to pin themselves to something that wasn't a pirate, but Axel robbed that from him by speaking.

“What was it you said?” Axel murmured. “About my eyes?”

He was inexorably warm.

Vexen dug into his wounds, clearing out gelatinous yellow from ruined muscle. It was sharp enough, deep enough, that Roxas cried out, and his eyes watered.

“You thought they weren't quite human, is that right?” Axel tried to distract him, holding him firmly.
“Axel,” Vexen's eyes strayed from his work, warning.

“What...?” Roxas was fast becoming dazed – it was too cold, but so warm, and the pain was so present. There was no relief in it, anymore; with all the blood he'd lost, the dampness and the lack of food... It was all catching up to him, and he was starting to feel delirious.

“Do you still think I'm a monster?” Axel muttered. “Only curious.”

It was so much harder to think, with something digging around in his wounds, sharp and cruel and frigid. The needle was going to follow, soon, but it couldn't be as bad as this.

“I... Ngh,” Roxas tried to form words. “I don't know...”

“I like to think I'm a nice enough man,” Axel glanced over Roxas's shoulder, watching Vexen prepare the needle again and sear his back with cold.

The numbing process was almost as bad as the cleaning – almost as bad as being whipped was, Roxas thought. His breath left him in an agonized hiss, arms twitching as he clung to Axel as tightly as he could.

“Hold still,” Vexen ordered coldly.

In contrast, that warm hand slid over his jaw. Roxas sank into it.

Axel's gaze flickered to Roxas's mouth, so close now, and whether it was taking advantage or not didn't matter. Roxas was cold, and hurting, and he really needed to keep still. Axel brushed his lips against Roxas's, much to Vexen's disgust.

Roxas stilled, not to pull away nor to return the beginnings of his kiss. He couldn't string together his thoughts enough to understand the significance, if there was any, or what his principles were.

“Just keep being distracted...” Axel murmured against his lips, and whatever scant space was between them was closed.

Axel was kissing him, firm and hot, and Roxas didn't care. He focused on the feeling, mouth slack to let Axel take his time and map him out.

The last of Roxas's wounds pulled closed, the thread snipped. He broke away from Axel, in that moment, almost panting.

Axel licked his lips and grinned.

The bandage work was quick. Vexen's face was pinched again, allowed to show his disapproval, with the hard part over with.

“You could have been more careful,” Axel criticized, over the side-effects of his own diversion, but Vexen ignored him to finish his work.

The bandages were taut, covering his handiwork lest strain break anything, and he ran a hand lightly along Roxas's spine to leave a icy trail in his wake. Roxas closed his eyes, holding his breath, though the coldness was a little more soothing this time.
The work was...satisfactory. Vexen wiped his hands once more with a rag, and closed up his kit. “Don't let him out again,” he sneered, getting to his feet. “Unless, of course, you'd like to give me a reason to smile. I regret that you weren't whipped more.”

“I'd make sure you went up against the mast right after me.”

Axel took great satisfaction in the way that wiped the pompous look off his face, as Vexen left, and turned his attention back to Roxas.

He was shivering, now, but he looked slightly more...alive. Axel let Roxas slump into him, asking, “Any better?”

“In a way,” he muttered, hoarse and weighted by exhaustion.

“At least you'll be able to move, in the future,” Axel suggested a bright side, which struck another note of surprise in Roxas, this one more sardonic. He'd never known of an optimistic pirate.

“Did he stitch you up, too?” Roxas wasn't sure why he asked, or if he cared.

“Not happily,” Axel nodded. “You're lucky, in a twisted sort of way. He doesn't numb me.”

Axel didn't think it was relevant to specify that he couldn't.

“He didn't seem to like you much,” Roxas observed tiredly.

“He loathes me.”

Conversation stilled, then, as Axel ran his hands over Roxas's arms and sometimes skimmed his back. He was staving off the cold as effectively as a flame, and Roxas had the presence of mind back to wonder how.

And, that numbing ice, from before... He had questions.

Axel began to pull away, but rather than simply dump him back onto the soiled floor, he helped him reach the wall as delicately as he was able. Roxas was limp, simply allowing Axel to handle him, and mustered the will to venture, “That thing he was doing, to numb me...”

“Yes...” Axel struggled to heave him sideways without aggravating his wounds.

“That was...some kind of medicine, right?”

Axel paused, lips twitching. “... No.”

Roxas batted at his hands, regaining some of his fight – enough to make it the rest of the way to the wall, short as the distance was. “What are you hiding?” he narrowed his eyes, disliking that almost-smile.

“Why not guess?” Axel's eyes were gleaming. “You're clever.”

It was impossible not to notice.

“If I have to guess, I don't think I'm going to like the answer,” Roxas leaned into his shoulder, and
the flare of discomfort put pressure through his entire torso.

“Would you like to keep not-knowing? Would you really be alright just letting things lie?”

Roxas hesitated. “From what I could feel... He was only using his hands.”

“That's right,” Axel confirmed, hands bracing against his knees as he stood.

“You're trying to tell me that he can...do that, with nothing but his own hands?”

“Right,” he twirled the keys around his finger – too late to pickpocket, too weak to have tried – and wandered back towards the cell door.

Roxas mulled this over, and shook his head. “That isn't possible.”

“Neither is this,” Axel held forth his other hand, outstretched towards Roxas urgently, like he just couldn't resist anymore.

A small flame shot up from the palm of his hand.

Roxas couldn't scramble back far enough, or fast enough. The short, shocked cry that left him was barely a squeak, eyes becoming wide and reflexive fear stealing what little pallor there was to his face.

Axel watched him, entertained, before snuffing out the flame.

It took several moments to slow his heart, again, staring at Axel like he'd just grown a second head. In Roxas's mind, this was stranger than even that – what he'd just done was genuine, not a trick of the light or an oddity.

Axel had just produced fire from nowhere.

“What was that?!” he demanded, starting to get angry in place of facing bewilderment.

“You've heard the stories,” Axel's voice dropped to an ominous hum, swinging the keys slowly. “A ship of pirates, an unstoppable force of ruthless rapists and murderers and thieves, that always escape with the wind and the sea on their side.”

“It's a myth,” Roxas countered in disbelief. “One that's been around much longer than you've been.”

Axel's grin split his face in two. “I look good for my age.”

Roxas's hands clawed at the dank floorboards, dragging himself farther back, as though an extra inch between them might spare him from whatever Axel could do. “You are a monster,” he accused.

“'Monster' is harsh. I'm not much different from you.” Axel's claim came loftily, still swinging the key. Roxas didn't believe him for a second.

“Is that your real face, or some mask you're wearing to trick me?” he glared.

“It's my face,” Axel stroked his sharp chin. “I'm pretty proud of it. Lures in boys like you before I devour them.”
Roxas clamped down on his fright. He couldn't let Axel see him be afraid.

Infuriatingly, horrifyingly, Axel laughed. “I'm not serious.”

Roxas was no less wary. His mind was racing, going over every seaside story he'd ever heard. “You...you can't be part of the crew that Never Was. Your skin was broken just by that whip.

“*Monster* is an exaggeration, like I said,” Axel sneered. “I bleed the way you do. I just don't bleed for long.

“I don't believe you,” Roxas struggled to swallow the lump in his throat. “G-get out!”

“Alright, I'll leave you alone,” Axel acquiesced easily, slinking out of the cell and shutting it. The key was shoved into the lock, but right then, Roxas couldn't lament the lost tease of freedom. At that moment, the cell door was the only thing between him...and whatever Axel really was.

“You know, you could still join the crew,” he offered as he pulled the key out, watching Roxas with those eyes.

Those eyes that were just as alarming as Roxas had first thought.

“Even if I chose to, how could I? I'm only a lowly mortal,” he spat, and regretted it.

But Axel didn't open the door again, or attack him through the bars. He stepped away, putting the key back in place with care.

“Mortals are not 'lowly','” was all he said.

Roxas was not sorry to see the back of him, and the cold of solitude felt safer than ever before.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all our lovely readers for coming this far with us. And sorry for the gross parts.

From this point on the plot is going to be running a bit more evenly. We know we've been jerking things around a fair bit to get to this point.

You could say it's smooth sailing from here on out – eh? See what I did?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Warning: dick touching. Dicks totally get touched, in this chapter.

The week to follow was torturous in its monotony; too quiet, too dull, too lonesome and cold.

It was Demyx who was charged most often with bringing Roxas sparse meals, and while he had that demeanor about him – something carefree and young, what he might've come to expect from a fresh-faced new sailor on his first voyage out to sea – there was no mistaking what he was.

Part of the Crew that Never Was. A monster, like Axel, and a pirate. So Roxas was not compelled to reach out to him or speak, and in turn, Demyx never paid him much mind. He hadn't noted or reported the treatment of Roxas’s wounds, though Axel had doubtlessly worked around orders to have him seen to.

That was best, for as solitary as his imprisonment was, it was a contradiction. Too loud, too busy, too overwhelming and heavy.

Pain kept him company more than anything, but Roxas put all his focus into feeling the raw hurt rather than let himself think. He was healing enough to be present, conscious, and it was allowing grief and fear to filter past the barriers of numbness he tried to build around himself.

He was in the company of inhuman beings, capable of unknowable cruelty, and they had killed his brother. His only family.

Roxas was incomplete. He felt as much, even as his treated wounds healed and his strength started to return to him. He could drag himself towards the bars, collect his meager meals, but the will to survive felt inherently wrong when he knew that Sora was dead.

Even if he escaped from this place, what could he go to? Where? And why?

It wasn't any good to linger, so he put his mind to simple things - moving around the cell to where his feet could keep dry, rubbing his skin from his legs up to his neck to work some of the chill away, then starting again, flexing his back until he couldn't bear it anymore and feeling a stinging relief when he relaxed again.

He didn't cry.

Pain was bearable, discomfort could be endured. If nothing else, it kept him from falling apart entirely.

If he had known that elsewhere on the sea, one week of recovery was enough to dredge Sora from his hypothermia-induced comatose state, the burden of solitude would have been lighter.
“He's waking, Captain.”

Riku's discussion with his helmsman was quickly drawn to a close, in the face of the sailor who had reported.

There had been no question in his mind, that the mysterious boy overboard would wake, in time. The strength he'd shown even when all had seemed lost was one thing, but Riku's own regular visits to the sick bay had made him all the more certain.

Deeply unconscious, still cold somewhere in his core, sick and fighting the infection from his whipped back... When he went to see him, Sora had still mumbled, softly in his sleep. He'd still twitched and frowned and leaned into warmth, decidedly and determinedly alive.

It would just take time, and that time was at an end.

“Excuse me,” Riku parted from the helm and descended, giving his subordinate a nod. “Thank you for letting me know.”

Riku hoped he'd been prompt in his delivery. He couldn't know for sure.

He made haste down to the sick bay, and found that he'd been told a partial truth.

Sora was conscious, but by no means awake. He was still lying in the position the medic had placed him in on his side. His eyes were clouded, his murmurs clearer, but there was no real comprehension on his face when Riku sat down beside him and introduced himself again.

Riku sighed softly. “You're still in no shape to tell us who you really are, or where you came from,” he lamented, studying Sora's face. “That's alright. You'll recover, in time. I'm going to be sure you're well looked after.”

Sora murmured again, slurring badly... But this time, there was something of a word within it.

“Pirates,” Riku repeated, a dreaded question. “A pirate ship?”

It was a possibility that he had been aware of. Sora could be a pirate, or an otherwise unsavory character.

That was no reason not to give him a chance to recover, and he would be judged in due course. Still... He'd rather hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Sora repeated the sound, but continued to speak. The look in his half-lidded eyes was hazy, and Riku thought he might be delirious.

“Pirate ship...took 's from th'town...”

Riku leaned forward, listening closely.

“Wasn't a v'ry nice home,” Sora mumbled, taking on what could almost be called a troubled expression, “but it w's a home... Roxas... Roxas used t' like the sunset there... Was brighter than everywhere else we'd ever lived...”

Riku kept silent, piecing together the sounds. They were indistinct, and he didn't recognize Sora's slurred attempt at 'Roxas' as a name, but he was beginning to form a theory.

Sora's eyes closed languidly. “Would've liked...to see it... one more time... But we'll n'ver see Twilight Town again...”
“The raid on Twilight Town?” Riku was pensive, reaching out and taking Sora's hand. It was hanging off the side of the cot, fingertips half-frozen. The grab had startled Sora, perhaps, or at least brought him back to the present before he could drift off again, just as Riku had intended.

“Weapons from nowhere,” Sora's voice was dream-like, “nd there were so...few of th'm... I thought there'd be more... But they d'stroyed... They took-... They w're heart'ss...”

The pieces were falling into place, and unconsciously, Riku squeezed Sora's hand.

Twilight Town, where his own ship had docked such a short time ago. The reports there had been unmistakable, and if Sora had been taken from there -

“But you,” Sora's eyes tried to focus. “I...r'member you... From the water...”

“You were a prisoner on the Ship That Never Was,” Riku breathed, heart beating a half-step faster.

Sora's eyes closed, his expression more relaxed in genuine sleep. He had no idea what he'd just done for their cause — Riku's cause — but he could have kissed Sora in that moment, struck speechless by good fortune.

For the first time following years of pursuit... They had a lead.

The only known survivor.

Under the Superior's watchful eye — and, more importantly, Saix's — Axel had made a point of avoiding the brig, until now. He very much doubted that Roxas would find him a welcome presence, anyway, though that wasn't honestly very much of a deterrent.

His own back had healed entirely, only thin white crisscrossed lines to show for it, bandages shucked off long ago and the stitches burned away by his own body temperature. He honestly couldn't remember how long it might take for a mortal's wounds to heal, and thought it had been long enough to at least warrant a check.

Besides... They'd had word, and Axel had been lucky enough to be among the first to know.

So he made his way below deck while he wasn't needed, and slunk up on the cell while Roxas stared into nothingness. He had to be lost in his own head, Axel surmised, to not have even noticed him coming.

“Roxas?” Axel's arms wound around the bars, taking the full sight of him in.

He was filthy, and pale. More gaunt than when they'd first taken him on board. Still, his hair was no less gold and his eyes no less blue, so it was hard for Axel to find any part of him unappealing.

“What?” Roxas had to clear his throat, voice raspy for disuse and little water.

“You don't look so good,” Axel observed, not as though he'd expected anything else. “Not holding up well?”
Roxas's smirk was hollow. “Not holding up well?”

“I might know something to perk you up again.”

“Sure,” Roxas's shoulders squared defensively, apparently not believing him for a second. “I'd love to hear what a monster has to say.”

“I know you will,” Axel ignored his tone entirely. “It's about your brother.”

Those pretty blue eyes narrowed, but Axel wasn't robbed of the sight of them until Roxas jerked his head towards the opposite wall, refusing point-blank to look at what could only be the bearer of more bad news. “What is it now?”

Perhaps he thought Axel was here to taunt him, he ruminated. It would make the surprise that much more pleasant.

“He's alive.”

Immediately, Roxas whipped around, so fast he could have strained himself. “What? What happened to him? Is he on another ship? How do you know?”

“We learn everything that happens at sea,” Axel answered, intentionally vague, and saw the shutters fall behind Roxas's eyes.

He didn't dare take him at his word, wouldn't let Axel raise his hopes, only to be played or brought crashing back down to a terrible reality.

“What does that mean? Was he seen or not?” Roxas's fists clenched, and he used the wall to get himself up to his feet. There were tremors in his legs, not having been used enough in days. He advanced on the cell bars, though, not wanting to show any more fear or weakness to a creature in case Axel was lying to his face.

“Yes and no,” Axel smirked at Roxas's flash of fury before expanding, “Let's just say that the Superior has ways of discovering damn near anything he pleases, but he doesn't know all. He doesn't know that I'm down here, telling you about it. In fact, he has yet to hear anything about Sora – I took that information straight to you. He's alive. On another ship, I'd wager. He would have drowned long before reaching land.”

Roxas was disregarding most of what Axel was saying, not able to wrap his head around it. His mind was working fast, and while he was never the optimist, he didn't really see what benefit there was to Axel in a lie.

The entire crew, Axel included, had him helpless. He'd failed to fight back against pirates; monsters were a whole other story.

“... It wasn't another pirate ship, was it?” He asked, at length.

“Maybe, maybe not. Couldn't guess for certain.”

Slowly, energy was creeping back into Roxas's veins. “He's alive...” he murmured.

“Thought you'd want to know,” Axel drew away from the bars. “Hope you feel better.”

Nothing had obligated Axel to tell him that. In fact, he seemed to be going against orders fairly often to aid his survival, whatever motive was behind it. That warranted something, Roxas supposed.
“...Thank you,” Roxas hesitated. “For telling me.”

“Not all bad for a monster, right?” Axel grinned.

Roxas's lips twitched, and he hoped Axel hadn't seen that. “But a monster is still a monster.”

“You cut me deep,” he laughed, starting to turn away. “I'll see you around later, Rox. Maybe.”

Axel didn't get far. Roxas sank into the bars, letting his arms creep through them and staring at Axel's back. Inhuman or not... He'd bantered and sworn at and, perhaps, flirted with this pirate before. Roxas knew enough of him to set aside the fear he'd been building in his head for days, and an odd flicker of rebellion was urging him to call after Axel.

“What'd you call me?”

Axel paused. “’Rox’.”

“If you're going to keep me in a cell 'til I rot, I'd at least appreciate if you'd call me by a real name,” he shot at him.

“’Rox’ could be a real name,” Axel faced him again, leering a little. “Besides, you make it sound like that's my call. If I had my way, I'd be keeping you in my bed.”

Roxas damned himself for nearly blushing. “I liked you a lot better before you were a kidnapper.”

“I've always been a kidnapper. Part of my job description.” Axel showed too many teeth when he grinned, too much like a shark instead of a rogue.

“Before I knew,” Roxas almost retreated, but held firm.

“Better kidnapped and unhappily informed, than dead.”

“Who says you had to do either?” Roxas scowled.

“We came to port for our usual,” Axel shrugged. “Take what we want. Kill whatever's left. Beauty's often tarnished when it's murdered, so I made a judgment call.”

“We could've gotten away,” Roxas argued, dropping to a bitter mutter. “We don't even belong to that town. We're of no value to them.”

“You could've gotten away from humans, maybe.” Axel wasn't sure if he was trying to comfort him by stressing how unavoidable his capture was, but he decided it nicer to take the tone of someone doing just that. “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Roxas's gaze lifted again.

Such pretty eyes. Axel let himself begin to get lost in them, for a second.

“...So, what are you?”

Axel hesitated. “...Truth is, we don't really know,” he confessed, “Not for sure.”

Roxas clearly wasn't satisfied with that answer, “Something must have...created you.”

“Well, it didn't stay long enough to tell us. I may have abandonment issues.”
Roxas considered that, sounding reluctant when he did speak again. “You aren't just inventing this story because of what I said, about your eyes?”

He rather hoped that he was.

“I'd be an impressive trick, right?” Axel didn't shoot it down immediately, picking up that teasing tone again.

“Pirates have not been known to turn away the use of trickery,” Roxas pointed out.

“Too right,” Axel smirked. “I might just be doing all this to impress you.”

“I was more impressed by the gold.”

“Pirate.”

Roxas's eyes narrowed at the accusation, however playful.

“Oh, come on, I was joking. Although you would be a good one,” Axel purred.

“Perhaps I do have the mercenary desire, but there's no way I could be so cruel.” Roxas's fists had clenched, no less resentful of the implication, but Axel seized on the opportunity.

He'd admitted a little; that was the first step towards giving Axel was he wanted.

“You don't have to be, you know. Not all of us are bad.”

“Like you, right?” Roxas scoffed.

“Wasn't exactly thinking of me, but I do have my moments.”

Unimpressed, Roxas's scowl evened out and became more sober, making a statement more than a threat. “I'm afraid you'll have to let me off this ship, or kill me.”

Axel leaned against the bars. “At this rate, Xemnas is going to choose the latter.”

“It would be better than becoming a part of this evil ship,” he retorted with all the venom he had left.

“Harsh, Roxas,” Axel shook his head, but there was something a little hollow behind it. “It really isn't all that bad.”

“Crewed by monsters,” Roxas's incredulity came off cold, and without knowing it, he'd touched on the exact argument behind Axel's own affect.

It really wasn't so bad; Axel thought so more often than not. But the source of their success, the thing that gave him the power to reduce a man to ashes and scatter him to the wind, laugh when the remains caught in their blackened sails...

He loathed the price that came with the power. They all did.

Roxas had no idea what the worst part of an inhuman crew was.

Axel's lips curled into a smirk, easy again. “You keep saying 'monster'. How sure are you that I'm a monster...? I didn't kiss like one, did I?”

“Kiss?” Roxas echoed, before his memories of last week clicked back into place. Between Vexen's
unnatural numbing methods and the agony of having his wounds torn into, Axel's kiss had gotten lost in the jumble. “Oh, right.”

“You forgot? I'm hurt.”

“I was distracted,” Roxas rolled his eyes.

“Then can I remind you what it was like?” Axel purred. Another thing Roxas was loathe to admit, he realized, was that he was becoming somewhat...fond, of that rough tone to his voice. Low, like that, and smoky, Axel sounded too much like a lover and not nearly as much the villain Roxas knew him to be.

“A pirate, asking permission?” Nonetheless, Roxas gravitated closer.

“Like I said... Not all bad.” Briefly, Axel considered reaching through the bars, grabbing him, jerking him closer - “Or maybe you're just special.”

Roxas must have been losing his mind, to actually consider this. Sora's survival had been a stroke of fate - if it was even true - and not of Axel's devising. Letting them loose amounted to no more than a game to him, a bit of entertainment, which Sora had paid the steepest price for.

But maybe he'd lost his grip already. Axel's presence was serving as a jarring reminder of what it was like to have someone speak to him, touch him, treat him like he was even real. The thought of losing that was enough to instill a sudden cold sense of panic.

He missed warmth, so much...

“Hm,” he didn't move, neither closer nor away. “What do I get if I say yes?”

“Aside from my body – which is in high demand, you ought t'know – what are you asking for?” It really would have been simpler to catch Roxas by the arms and force him to play along.

That was so unappealing, though. Axel got too much out of the banter... The play.

“Something worthwhile...”

“I can't let you out,” Axel warned, expression darkening somewhat.

“I know that, and I don't want it,” Roxas denied. “There's something more important.”

“Then what...?”

Roxas's eyes – so fierce and so blue, blazing even when somber – met Axel's, all of his former fear gone. “Find out everything you can about my brother. If he's safe, if he's been tended to, what ship he's on. If he's land-bound. I don't care how you do it. Just do that, for me.”

Axel hesitated. “I won't promise specifics,” he warned. “I don't know that I can. But I'll see what I can do. What I can tell you is this much...”

Unconsciously, Roxas held his breath.

“That he's alive now means that whatever ship he's on, they'll have seen to his wounds and kept him well. That's not treatment you'd find aboard a pirate crew.”

The breath was released. “So you think he's among lawful men?”
“He’d have to be.”

The lingering weight on Roxas's chest lifted, and he nodded. “Alright.”

Axel's hand caught him by the arm, but he coaxed him just a little bit closer with a gentleness neither of them had expected. “So, if I were to go in there, you won't just take a cheap shot and try to dive off the ship?”

It felt like it'd been such a long time since Roxas had been able to smile, but he started to, now. “I might just make it to that ship Sora's on.”

“I'd bide my time, personally, but I don't care for that much swimming,” Axel grinned back.

“I suppose I don't feel like getting cold, right now.”

“I can definitely help with that.”

Axel's hand was hot, against his arm. He didn't doubt that. Still, Roxas surveyed him with a little more mistrust – he wouldn't be so quick to 'reward' him, considering Axel was the cause for his capture to begin with. “What are you planning, if you need to be in here with me?”

The answer came bluntly. “I want to touch you.”

“And no tricks?” Roxas wavered.

“You know, normally the 'touching you' part would qualify as the trick,” Axel snickered. “But nothing else, no.”

How much 'touching' did Axel intend to do, he wondered. Still, Roxas's gaze dropped, scanning down his full height. “It wouldn't be so bad to get the same privilege.”

His fortunes couldn't fare much worse than they already were. And the way Axel was talking it sounded like he didn't have long to grab something good while it was still in front of him. Snatch up a last bit of pleasure to get him through to the end.

And here Axel was, offering...

God, he didn't care, anymore.

Axel's hand withdrew, and he went to grab the key. “If you get out, I'm going to pay for it,” he seemed to speak more to himself than to Roxas, which was just as well; Roxas couldn't honestly say he minded the idea of getting him into trouble again.

Trying to escape now would have no benefit, though. He was still healing, and he wouldn't make it to Sora's ship – if it was still anywhere close, if it definitely existed beyond the shadow of a doubt.

He watched Axel closely as he unlocked the door, anyway, and left the key in the lock. So he couldn't pickpocket him, Roxas guessed. There was nothing to keep him in here but Axel's presence, now.

Axel didn't give him very much time to think on that. He'd crossed the short distance and kissed him, and very quickly, Roxas started to remember what the first time had been like.

He was so unnaturally warm. Roxas's head tilted slightly to mold their lips together properly, body fitting against Axel's as he was pulled right to him. He'd been moving in closer, anyway, shifting his weight to his toes in an attempt to match Axel's height a little better while he pulled down at his shirt.
Axel's hands slipped down his sides, skimming over the bandages with disinterest until he found skin again. They gripped just above his hips, pleasantly searing him from the outside while his tongue seemed intent on doing the same to the inside. Axel was deft but happy to take his time, tracing behind his teeth and catching on his lips every time he drew back.

He kissed him like a tidal wave, powerful to the point of nearly overwhelming, and Roxas had never been kissed like *that* before.

He wouldn't let that overcome him. Roxas kissed him back like he was declaring it a competition, pulling himself up higher and slinging his arms around Axel's shoulders.

That had been what Axel had wanted and hoped for. His hands began to inch forward, the heat coming off him in waves.

Either Roxas hadn't been able to breathe and keep up simultaneously, or the hands coming to rest against his ass were unwelcome. He broke away a little, lips a little kiss-swollen but not frowning.

“You can shove me off, if you want,” Axel offered, leaning in to follow his lips.

“You should be more careful, or I might start thinking you're chivalrous.”

“You're smart. You know better,” Axel removed one hand and caught Roxas's chin instead, tilting it up to expose his unmarked neck. Something he sought to rectify, lips trailing downwards instead of pursuing another kiss.

Roxas's breath caught. “And I will shove you off...”

He hadn't expected it – *him* – to be so...like this.

“...when I want to.”

Axel could find the soft beat of his pulse, on his throat. He lingered there, lips parting to press and tongue flicking over skin to taste, before he began to suck. Both hands met against Roxas's ass again, beginning to feel him like he was trying to memorize the shape.

Roxas arched a little, nearly pressing into his hands without giving it much thought – he was used to being grabbed and groped, though he didn't mind it, exactly – but he had to swallow a moan at the barest scrape of teeth against nerves he'd never been awakened to.

He could feel Axel smirk against his neck, damn him. His hands moved from his backside to his chest, leaving wide swaths of tingling warmth in their wake. Roxas was undeniably pleased by them, so much so that he wasn't even thinking about the unnaturalness of Axel's heat, but he needed to do more. Just allowing Axel to touch was frustrating. He pulled him back up by his jaw, resuming their kiss from where it left off.

Given his enthusiasm in kissing back, Roxas guessed he didn't mind being taken from his (possibly bruised, now) throat. His hands dropped from Axel's jaw to his sides and hips, exploring fleetingly before slipping his fingers under Axel's belt.

His exploration was reciprocated, then rewarded. One hot palm pressed at the apex of Roxas's thighs, massaging against his covered cock.

The warmth spread right down to his toes, and Roxas broke away from the kiss with a short groan.

“Expected you to shove me, at this point,” Axel's own breathing wasn't so even, anymore, pressing
just a little bit harder.

Roxas's response was very verbal, but didn't contain a single word. He took that as encouragement, and sought out skin, instead.

The bare heat against his half-hardened length was pleasant instead of painful, as Roxas had feared for a second that it might be. He moved into it, biting down against Axel's throat to keep from embarrassing himself with another moan.

So intent on those little noises, every hitch of breath, Axel didn't hear footsteps.

“Whoa, Axel. Gunnin' for another lashing, already?”

Axel's hand stilled, pulling off of Roxas. Stunned, Roxas withdrew into himself and bit down on a scowl.

Xigbar leered. Roxas didn't have enough modesty to be humiliated by being discovered, but he wasn't keen to be looked at. He rather wished he had something more than rags and bandages, to cover himself.

“Damn it, Xigbar,” Axel scowled, frustration very quickly reaching a boiling point.

“Gotta say, though, good thinking. Took my idea before I could even get to it,” Xigbar smirked, unrepentant. Axel would have sorely loved to burn out his other eye, but he grinned instead – forced, but it didn't look it – and shrugged.

“So, what's it going to take to keep this between us?” He raised an eyebrow. “I'll cover Demyx's nights for the next little while... Keep Luxord and Xaldin occupied...”

“I'll take up the favor later. Right now the Cap'n wants us all on deck, so tuck it back in.”

“Right,” Axel's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. “I'll be there in a second.”

“Could always stall, if you wanna finish up the show for me,” Xigbar raked Roxas over with his visible eye, and earned a venomous glare in return.

“Leave,” Axel rolled his eyes and began fixing his clothing.

“Tell me, the next time you start molesting the pretty-boy,” Xigbar laughed, turning on his heel to go back up to the deck.

Axel continued to fuss with his clothing until Xigbar was gone. “I'm sneaking you in a knife,” he growled.

“Thanks.” The response was insincere and unamused.

“I'm serious,” Axel glanced at him, the aftermath of Xigbar's intrusion having left him irritated. “He doesn't have my...morals. If he tries anything, you castrate him.”

“I'm surprised no one's done it already,” Roxas sank into the wall, jaw setting. The moment had long passed, for him, leaving him with nothing to do but watch Axel calm himself back down.

But he wasn't nearly as cold as before. Some of Axel's warmth still lingered, inside, though his skin felt icy to the touch again.

“If you're thinking of doing me any more favors, some clothing would be nice.”
“Too right,” Axel breathed out slowly. “Surprising you haven’t caught your death of cold, down here. I'll see what I can do for you.”

And then Axel kissed him.

He only lingered over the contact for a second, catching Roxas's mouth with all of the warmth but none of the passion, from before. It was just a kiss, not taking anything this time, and it was over before Roxas knew what to make of it.

“I'll see you later,” Axel withdrew, turning the key to lock him back in before he left the brig.

All the while, Roxas tried to hold on to what warmth was left, and forgot to say anything in reply.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

As y'all will see, this is a pretty short chapter. We're sorry about that, but it's only because the next chapter is going to be longer than any of those previous.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Definitive trails were hard to find, on the water. The Highwind had nothing but the direction of the air to go by, hoping against hope that they might speed across the water until a ghost-white ship was on the horizon.

It would take a keen eye, but that was why the Kingdom of Radiant Garden had employed as many pairs of them as possible. The sharpest blades, the finest tools. The fastest vessel ever built by their most experienced shipwrights.

The most capable naval officer, to take command of it.

Riku knew, logically, that the Admiral of the Royal Navy would not have entrusted anything so important to him, were he not the most qualified. He was young – the youngest Captain to have ever been named, and not only in their own kingdom’s history books. Despite his age, there had been no one better with a sword, no one else with the confidence and experience in making swift decisions. No one else knew every bolt, plank, and sail of the Highwind, the way Riku did. No one else was as determined, or as steadfast.

The Imperial Navy had said all of those things, and named him Captain.

Periodically, though, he was sure that they'd made a mistake.

His name would be written in ledgers, but only time would tell whether it would be to tell of his accomplishments or his failures. Riku stared over the side of the ship into inky black night, watching clouds roll over the ocean's surface.

Hours ago – by daylight – they’d seen it. A ship that shone like the moon during the day, pale against a brilliant blue sky. Riku had taken immediate charge of the helm and dropped the sails. For a short, sweet time, the wind had been on their side.

It had been nothing more than a tease. The Ship That Never Was stayed right there, always on just the edge of the horizon, until the sky had faded to graying twilight and it all but disappeared.

The wind had diminished, the pirate ship had escaped their sight, and by the time they could see through the cloud cover... Who knew whether or not they would still be on the right track.

Riku's arms uncrossed, bracing against the rail as he righted himself. He wasn't doing himself any favors; the longer he looked out at sea, the more frequently he tricked himself into spotting shapes in the fog. Every time, it proved to be a product of his own lamenting imagination.
Even if they did catch up to The Ship That Never Was... What did he intend to do?

They all knew the tales, though he cared not at all for fairy stories. They'd all been blown massively out of proportion, facts becoming terrorizing legend. Pirates who couldn't be killed, they all said, with fanged grins and a hunger for human meat.

Savages. That much could be deduced as truth. Riku just needed to know more, and he had on-board the only person who'd ever seen those pirates up close.

Already, his feet were carrying him in the direction of the sick bay. Sora drifted in and out, most days. Sometimes he mumbled, but it hadn't been comprehensible since that first time he'd stirred. Anxious gibberish, in the words of the surgeon. Riku had advised him to keep his ears alert, anyway.

He'd see if there was any visible improvement, and then get to bed. It seemed as though sleep was in scarce supply, as of late. Even when there was no cause to disturb him, he had a lot of trouble drifting off, usually staring at his dark ceiling until he couldn't stand it anymore. He'd get up, light a lantern, and watch it sway with the ship's rocking for an hour until it finally lulled him.

If Sora was doing any better, he might have an easier time of it. Sora was one of the things that most occupied his late night musings; he couldn't be completely certain that he was an innocent, and if it came to light that he was really some kind of criminal...

Or, worse, on the pirate's side...

He didn't want to think about the possible consequences of an error like that, but he did. He thought about them a lot.

Riku's steps were quiet among the natural creaking of the ship, making his way deep into the hull. He only made one detour, taking from their supplies and vowing to update the ledgers in the morning. With a blanket over his arm – somewhat musty, from storage – he went to Sora, and sank into the chair at his bedside.

The lantern light was dim, but his face was illuminated almost entirely. They'd laid him down on his front, so as not to aggravate his back. Riku wished he could see the wounds to check how his healing was coming along, but he didn't dare disturb the bandages.

Riku wouldn't touch him, at all. As badly as he wished he'd wake up, he didn't want to force it or jolt him. He decided not to count draping a second blanket over Sora's sleeping form, though, shaking dust out onto the floor beforehand.

“I have no idea if they've been keeping you warm enough,” he muttered, voice only a notch above a whisper. “This far below deck, though... I don't want to risk your health any more than it's already suffered.”

Sora's breath was slow, soft, even. Riku watched his face, studied the barest flicker of his eyelashes. His eyes only moved as much as any man's would, as he dreamed. Riku didn't expect him to wake, so he felt no disappointment and spoke to him anyway.

“I've been checking with the doctor, the cook... I would entrust them to feed you as well as they can, but given their suspicion of you and how little you can do in this state, I had to make sure. The broth they've been feeding you, it should be helping to rebuild your strength, too. ... You should be fit to do more than mumble, soon. I hope that you will be.”
His eyes strayed to Sora's arms, covered by the blankets. The longer it took, the more he would wither. Would lying there cause more than weakness? Were his muscles rotting away?

Riku felt like he knew nothing.

“All my education, and I was never taught how to gauge someone's health. You have more color in your cheeks, now... But, compared to how pale you were when we first met... That doesn't surprise me. You looked like you might die, that night. I won't lie – I actually thought that you would. To have survived... You're obviously strong, and I admire that.”

What if the rosiness to his cheeks was from cold? Riku could test it, with a touch...

He was still so much paler than he was meant to be. There was a golden tone to Sora's skin that he recognized; in the sunlight, and healthy, he would have been tanned. His color still wasn't right, but maybe that was because he hadn't seen the sun.

Riku would've liked to take him above deck. Just for a while.

“I was brought up to value it above all else, you know,” he leaned back in the chair. “Strength, I mean. My father always told me that strength is what carries people through the most difficult trials... Not resourcefulness or intelligence or hope. Not that there isn't value in those things, but... By the end of the day...”

He trailed off.

“You look like the type who's... You don't put all your stock in strength,” he murmured, studying Sora's peaceful face. “You rely on other things, I imagine. I...try to be that way.”

His father praised him, when he managed to show something other than only power. Creativity, out-maneuvering.

“But strength is still the key. Strength is what people respect.”

He did respect this boy, Riku reflected. It was one of the reasons he most feared the idea of Sora being on the wrong side. Privately, he'd been praising Sora for his survival, impressed by the tenacity it took not to drown.

“It would have been simpler to accept death, I think,” he mused. “Then again... Perhaps it wouldn't be. I don't know what you live for. Or...anything about you, for that matter. Had I been in your place...”

... Maybe he would have succumbed to weakness. Given in to the inevitable.

“No. I would have done what you did, I think,” a smile ghosted across Riku's lips. “I owe it to Kairi. To both of them, as a matter of fact. I swore myself to the kingdom's service, but more than that... I made a promise, and I can't break it. If I don't succeed, it won't be because I gave in.”

If he didn't succeed.

Sora's face, judgment-free, turned into the pillow a tiny bit. He really did appear to be sleeping, as peacefully as a child.
“I may have already failed.” Unconsciously, he wrung his hands in his lap. “It's been years. There's no telling what they've done with her. If don't bring her back alive... It won't feel any of this was worthwhile. I could put that ship at the bottom of the ocean, and it would still be a hollow victory. If I don't sink the Never Was crew, though, no one will call it a victory at all. Least of all the Admiral... Least of all my crew.”

His fingers clenched against his palms. “They already think I've failed. I hear whispers, below deck, when they think I'm not close by. Or, for all I know, they just don't care what I hear. They all thought that with a faster vessel, a hand-picked crew... They thought we'd have caught up, by now.”

Sora's breath sounded louder, to him, but Riku was fairly certain it was his imagination. He didn't look to be any more alert than he was when Riku first sat down.

“... I thought so, too. I started off overconfident. That was my key mistake. That only compounded their belief that I'm nothing more than a child.”

The youngest captain in history, he thought gloomily. For all of the importance resting on the Highwind, and their mission... All of his capability and cleverness... They were still gambling, with Riku, and a lack of progress was as good as losing.

“I suppose I'm not proving my maturity,” he sighed, “talking to an unconscious boy about my fears. It isn't as though I have anyone else I could speak to, though. I can't give anyone on my crew any more reason to think I'm not strong enough, for this. You can't know this, but, even if you turn out to be an enemy... You have value on this ship, Sora. I'm glad to be able to speak to someone other than my own reflection.”

“Mm...”

Riku's eyes flickered to his face, becoming intent on Sora's eyes. “Are you waking up?”

“It's not time t'wake up yet, is it?” Sora mumbled, drowsy and muffled by the pillow. His lashes were fluttering, but he appeared completely unwilling to actually open them.

“Long overdue,” Riku leaned forward, concealing a smile.

“T'vern isn't busy 'til sundown,” Sora complained. His eyes only opened to a slit, foggy blue barely visible. “And I'm too tired t'deal with the sailors...”

He was still delirious, but not nearly as terribly as he was before. At least he was speaking a bit more clearly.

“You're on board my ship. The Highwind. A warship from the Kingdom of Radiant Garden.”

“Nev'r been there,” Sora frowned. “Radiant Garden... 's a ship?”

“The Highwind is a ship,” Riku corrected. “My ship. You came from The Ship That Never Was, is that right?”

Sora's eyes slipped closed again, but only for a second. “Roxas... Is Roxas here?”

“No. You were overboard... We found you alone. Who's Roxas?”
“My brother,” Sora's expression began to twist in distress. “He's...not here?”

Riku swallowed the sympathetic tightness developing in his throat. “No. Was he thrown overboard, as well?”

“No...” Sora's voice tapered off to a whine. “He's still on th'ship... Pirate ship...”

“...I'm trying to catch that ship,” Riku vowed. “We'll get to your brother. Stop the pirates.”

“Roxas...” Sora repeated. “S stuck on the ship... I need to save him... We've... 've never been apart... He's prob'bly really upset... And lonely.”

Among pirates, he was likely a great deal worse off than only 'upset' and 'alone'. Riku didn't see fit to say that. Sora was troubled, enough, and still healing.

He wished he hadn't roused Sora, now. He felt like he'd only dragged him from unconsciousness to upset him.

“I need t'get him back... And we could go back to the islands,” Sora seemed to be comforting himself, though, expression beginning to even out again as thoughts slipped out of his grasp. “Was warm, there... Roxas liked that... Even at night, it was warm, could...lie on the beach, 'n the sand, spent all day soaking up sunlight and it was soft... And we'd huddle together. Never felt too hot. I miss it, too...”

Riku just listened.

“And there was fruit, growing everywhere,” he continued, completely off his original track. “They had legends about it... They said, 'f you share it with someone, you're t'gether forever... Your destiny, it's bound to someone else's and you always find each other. R'xas and I used to climb trees and we'd eat them together...”

“Destiny Islands,” Riku nodded slowly. “Paopu fruit. Kairi-... A friend of mine, she loves that legend. She used to want to travel there, but you... You lived there?”

“For a while,” Sora hummed. “Not forever... When they died...we left. There wasn't 'nywhere to live, anymore... But we were okay. Until, the pirates...”

His calm had evaporated again and Sora's eyes opened most of the way, looking at Riku without much focus.

“...We'll save him?” Sora whispered.

Riku squeezed Sora's hand, gently. He didn't even remember taking hold of it.

“We will. We'll save them both. Your brother, and Namine.”

Sora's eyes closed again, and breathed deep until his expression became peaceful and unaware again.
Chapter End Notes

PS. The rating is going to be changing, and some of the tags updated come next chapter. Take from that what you will.
“I come bearing gifts.”

Axel brought a narrow blade along, with Roxas's next meal. It was still in-hand, rather than slipped into the cell with the customary scrap of bread and broth. Most desirably, though, Axel was carrying a frayed pair of breeches and a cotton shirt, over his arm.

Roxas had expected to see him much sooner. Demyx had been the one to bring him dinner, last night, and he'd seen him again at breakfast. A full day, since he'd seen Axel, and the only reason he could have possibly felt slighted for it was that he'd all but promised to give him a way to fend for himself.

Against the cold, and against a predator. Thankfully, Xigbar hadn't shown his face, either. There was nothing to threaten him, and somehow... Axel had managed to shift himself, just slightly, out of that category.

He threw himself to the bars, ignoring the food (and the acidic protests of his stomach) to grab at Axel's arm. He was ravenous, but more than that, he was freezing.

"Don't hurt yourself," Axel laughed, watching him pull on the shirt first – far too big on him, long enough to cover his hips – before Roxas knelt to cram the bread in his mouth with the fervor of a starving man.

He was eyeing the knife, warmed by several degrees and chewing away at the bread. His priority became the blade, though he hadn't pieced together how he might take from Axel, yet.

It probably wouldn't take much. Axel was being careless, tossing it up idly and catching it by the hilt each time. With even one wrong move, he might drop it, and it would be possible to grab it from there...

He dangled it from his fingers by the blade on the next catch, waving it almost on-level with Roxas's face. "So, how are you going to convince me you won't just stab me, when I give this to you?"

Roxas didn't get an opportunity to respond. Axel was already holding the knife out for him to take the hilt, smirk tight. He was a lot more bothered by the idea of Xigbar creeping into Roxas's cell than the chance of being Roxas turning the gift on him.

"I won't convince you," Roxas accepted the blade, turning it over in his hand with a faint look of gratitude. It was easier to feel the weight of food in his stomach, and the feel of fabric on his cold skin, when there was a small bubble of safety for him to take refuge in. If no one else knew about the blade – and Axel wouldn't tell, unless he wanted to be punished for being the one to deliver it to him – he went from being a defenseless prisoner to a threat, lying in wait.
It was a false sense of security, in some ways, but so long as he didn't get cocky...

Axel watched him lay it on the ground far behind him, chewing another overlarge bite of bread while he shamelessly ditched his torn, dirty trousers to pull on the newer pair. “I'm taking an awful lot on trust, Roxas…”

“But you do trust me, or you wouldn't give it to me,” Roxas spoke through his mouthful, manners shafted to the wayside as he secured his belt. He spoke again once he'd swallowed, “At least, you trust me to use it on the right person.”

“Yes and no,” Axel smirked, following every step of his progress. Roxas was figuring out where it would be best to conceal his weapon. “I still think you'd slit my throat, if you thought it was worth your while.”

“Possibly. But it's not, and you know it.” With care, he concealed the dagger against the small of his back.

“I'm glad you know it, too, 'else I would be in a lot more trouble.”

Roxas double-checked his belt – the only thing he could use to make sure his knife stayed in place, even if that meant he had to keep it uncomfortably tight – and knelt down to pick up the skein of water. It sloshed, barely half-full, but he guzzled it down as though it was just enough. Once it was emptied, he dropped it back onto the tray and took in a deep breath. “I still can't figure out if this means you don't care what happens to your crew, if you don't care what happens to yourself – which I doubt – or if you just don't care at all.”

Axel focused on the teasing glimpse of Roxas's tongue, flicking over his lips to catch stray droplets and then moving deftly behind his teeth to form words. He almost didn't register a single one of their meanings.

He almost didn't listen, either, some clatter above deck drawing him away from Roxas's cell.

There was trouble. Or, if there wasn't... There was about to be.

“I care deeply.”

Axel didn't specify what it was he cared for. Roxas's brow furrowed slightly, at least in part out of exasperation, but he was robbed of the opportunity to ask for an explanation. Footsteps, coming down fast with a complete lack of grace.

Demyx was flustered, a little despondent. “Axel...! Are you down here?” He called out before he reached them, bracing up against the wall when he came to too-abrupt of a stop.

Axel quickly turned his back on Roxas, a long step away from the bars. “What's going on?”

“Attack, it's mutual,” Demyx's words almost ran together, blurring out fast. “They're about to blow the signal – Cap'n noticed them approaching, we're countering, they'll need you on deck.”

Roxas was practically forgotten. Axel strode forward, clapping a hand on Demyx's shoulder as he sidled past him. “Law?”


Roxas's hands had wrapped around the bars, staring at the pair of his captors with a new wash of dread. It hadn't occurred to him that pirates could be under attack from other pirates. If the ship was
boarded, if someone came down here... They would be armed, and a little knife wouldn't be enough.

There was no keeping the beginnings of panic out of his voice, “Axel.”

To his chagrin, Axel only tossed him a glance over his shoulder with a quick grin flashing over his face, and then he was gone.

“Axel!” Roxas shouted after him, heartbeat starting to hammer away in his chest again and trying to shake the bars. “Axel, you bastard!”

He was trapped down here and in more danger than before, and Axel was just leaving.

Demyx hadn't gone after him, yet, wringing his hands a little as he debated whether or not he could get away with going below deck and staying out of sight. He was rarely one for violence, and even less enthused about putting himself in harm’s way. The blow of a familiar horn, from above-deck, quashed his ideas. They'd been called to arms, and if he wanted to avoid pain and punishment...

He said nothing to Roxas, but shrugged helplessly in his direction as he scarpered off to the deck.

"Agh!" The bars clanged a little as Roxas hit them in frustration, retreating backwards into his cell with tension across his shoulders.

He could hear the warring, above deck. The destructive boom of cannons, too distant to be from The Ship That Never Was. Screams, that got closer and closer. For the most part, it was all too indistinct, and he couldn't piece together a picture of what was happening. It did nothing to soothe his agitation.

The knife was drawn, and Roxas tried to contort his arms around the bars to pick the lock with the tip of the blade. Simply because he'd never opened a lock with a knife before, he would not be dissuaded from making an attempt. He had to get out of the cell. He had to hide.

The Ship That Never Was had pulled up directly alongside the other pirate ship, allowing their slipperier adversaries the chance to board them for the convenience of sending Saix over to wreak havoc. The death outweighed the number of men who managed to evade the fire and the blades, but greed managed to overshadow even the danger.

Thunderous footsteps beat their way below deck, jolting Roxas from his attempt to spring himself. He flattened himself against the wall, unsure if whoever was approaching was from this ship or another. He wasn't even sure which would be worse, but no matter who it was, they weren't going to help him.

The man who'd boarded had come to raid, but lost himself below deck just to escape the chaos and destruction. He was trying to catch his breath, beady eyes peering behind him to check if he'd been followed.

Roxas's breath caught in his throat, and he carefully slipped his knife back into concealment.

“... Well,” the man spotted him, surprise becoming a sneer. He went for his sword, approaching the bars with greed renewed. “Aren't you pretty?”

Roxas's eyes narrowed, swallowing down fear.

“Sad, keeping something as pretty as you behind bars, i'nnit?” The man's scarred lips split into a broad grin.

“Scared you into hiding, did they?” Roxas sniped, venomous. He was out of the man's reach; his
arms were too thick to fit through the bars, and the sword tip wouldn't get to him from where he was... But he was not safe.

“Proud of your demon crew, are ya’?” The pirate laughed sharply, backing away to start looking for the keys. From the look on his face, it was obvious he thought he could get himself a little entertainment while he was hiding out.

Roxas backed farther into the cell, backing towards the corner with widening eyes. Only part of his anxiety was from fear of the strange man, now – more than that, the realization that he might unlock the door, give him an opportunity...

The pirate unlocked the cell, sword held up at level with Roxas's throat. He stepped towards him slowly, keeping Roxas pinned there on threat of impalement.

“You'll be obedient for me, won't ya'?" The pirate muttered, excitement mounting. “Won't cause trouble...”

Roxas sank right into the wall, shrinking as much as he was able. His hand found the hilt of his knife.

“That's right,” he crooned, the sword lowering as he got closer, and his free hand wrapping around Roxas's throat.

Roxas clamped a hand around the thick wrist caging his neck, any remorse he might have had dwindling in the face of his utter repugnance. The knife was flicked out from the belt, shoved into the pirate's abdomen as deeply as it could go. It was ripped out, just as quickly.

He didn't seem to realize he was in pain for several seconds. His cry was strangled, staggering sideways out of shock. The pirate didn't think to drop the sword, put pressure on the wound; he was clearly in shock, sputtering as he collapsed against the wall.

There was a lot of blood, seeping out of him fast.

Roxas didn't linger to watch whether or not he was dying. He shoved him as hard as he could, putting more distance between them and making a break for the open cell door, bloodied blade at the ready. He wasn't even sure where he was going, what he wanted to do, but he knew he had to be out of here.

He nearly collided with another body, just as he'd passed out of the brig. Roxas drew the blade up, prepared to stab whoever dared -

Axel grabbed him by the shoulders, rather than catch his wrist, and Roxas froze. Their eyes met, and neither of them spoke for the moment it took for Roxas to remember himself.

The knife went down. Axel grinned.

“Go grab his sword.”

Roxas didn't think twice about it, even if it did mean doing as Axel bade. He doubled back, Axel nearby, and surveyed the pirate with caution before he approached. The man wasn't dead yet, but his eyes were glazed, arms limp at his sides. The sword was by his feet, ripe for taking.

Even so, Roxas was careful in taking it from him. He slunk backwards with the sword, by a step.

“We're outnumbered by dozens. Not overpowered, but they're irritating... Like a swarm of ants,”
Axel only waited a beat before turning away, still speaking loud enough for Roxas to hear.

Roxas's blood still pounded in his ears. A spark of something vengeful coursed through him, and he delayed following Axel long enough to pick up the fallen keys and trap the wounded man inside the cell with a damming click.

The keys went in his pocket, and then Roxas was dashing up to the deck.

The fading rays of sunlight shone down on bodies. Luxord had rounded up survivors, keeping them still as an unfamiliar man with rosy hair hooked a large blade under their throats and severed them right through. Xaldin was throwing one man overboard, and if anyone was still on the other pirate ship, the majority of the Never Was crew was intent on flushing them out. Their sails were burning, but the destruction was shockingly minimal for all the explosive sounds Roxas had heard, from the brig.

Axel didn't look to have a weapon. He didn't need one; a fistful of flames was all he needed, but his free hand caught Roxas by the sleeve to steer him towards the planks to board the other ship.

He didn't care where he was directed. Adrenaline was coursing through him hard and fast, and no one was above mercy anymore; filthy pirates, all of them, and he was under the sky for the first time in so long. He couldn't remember 'escape'.

That man's attack, his imprisonment, the way pirates like Xigbar looked at him like he was something weak to play with... He wanted to hurt someone.

Axel's handful of fire expanded, chakram replacing the emptiness. The spikes ran through the first unfamiliar face, and a pirate trying to charge them down was brought to the deck when Roxas ducked around him and dragged him down by a sword to the throat.

He didn't keep track of Axel, or pay attention to the parts of him still healing. There were so few people still alive on board, but one of the corpses had something that glinted hanging off his belt. Tempting, but...

It didn't have the same allure as gold.

Roxas knelt by the body and lifted the dagger off him, the handle tarnished silver and the blade decently sharp. He glanced up sharply, keeping an eye on every flutter of movement – everybody that surfaced from below deck was recognizable as one of the inhuman Never Was pirates, hooting and shouting to each other, bloodied and glowing and deadly.

His shoulders squared, whipping around and slashing his blade across the chest of a panicked-pale man. Not someone he recognized, not someone worth anything. Why he'd done anything other than abandon ship was beyond Roxas's comprehension; maybe he'd thought Roxas could be held hostage in exchange for an opportunity to get away, but with a gash across his chest deep enough to expose traces of white rib cage... He wouldn't be going anywhere, anymore.

Axel approached Roxas with a faint swagger, a bell clanging from The Ship That Never Was. Roxas started, looking back and letting Axel catch his eye.

“They're all dead,” Axel translated the sound, for him. “Dead, or cornered. No threats left, anymore.”

Realization passed over Roxas's face, the kick of adrenaline spent in the few manic moments he'd been on board the enemy ship. He understood the situation he was in, now, and how it had changed.
He got to his feet, still holding the silver dagger tightly and looking around quickly.

He'd squandered any opportunity he had, to run away. He wouldn't be allowed to keep the weapon, he'd be inordinately lucky if he was locked away without further injury, but... Maybe he'd be able to hold onto something. Anything useful that he could hide on his person...

He spotted a pair of doors, the only panels of coloured glass. They would lead somewhere important, somewhere where precious things were kept.

Roxas sidled past Axel, breaking open the empty Captain's quarters to start turning it over for loot.

“Nice decision,” Axel whistled lowly, following him in. The good stuff was undoubtedly locked up, but blatantly; the trunk was chained up, but the metal looked cheap. He knelt by it, taking the chain in hand and starting to heat it up.

There was other gold, littered about the room, but Roxas zeroed in on it like a magpie. He favored the pieces of Jewellery encrusted with precious stones, the gold bits and the old coins. Nothing would be particularly helpful, in captivity, but he scanned for anything that might make imprisonment more bearable. Silk handkerchiefs, a long and jagged pin that he might use as a tool.

His gaze was greedy and sharp, and Axel found that look...strangely exciting. He watched Roxas sift through the cabin with incredible focus, every valuable he stowed on his person seeming to give Roxas a ripple of deep satisfaction. The melted chain dropped, but Axel didn't crack open the chest, approaching Roxas instead.

He wasn't trying to be sneaky. Given the malice Roxas had displayed up on deck only moments ago, startling him seemed unwise. He murmured Roxas's name as he came up behind him, stepping towards him while still in Roxas's view. Axel watched his fingers tighten around the sword hilt, not oblivious to the possibilities. Out here, without bars or the immediate threat of the Never Was crew, Roxas could attack him. He might, if Axel tried to haul him back to the brig when he hadn't finished his looting.

Roxas wasn't ready, tense from caution. “Hm?”

“I like you much better, like this,” Axel leaned into him, hand catching his shoulder, and grazing his lips along Roxas's jaw, which he unthinkingly offered to him. Roxas's eyes were still firmly picking apart the contents of a desk drawer that he'd opened.

“You...made that obvious enough,” he replied, focusing on a blade. Silver, like the blade he'd lifted off the other crewman, and so much sharper, so much deadlier and absolutely beautiful.

He had to take it. The way it glimmered...

“What can I say?” Axel's tongue – only the tip of it – grazed his jawline as he drew himself upright again and stepped away. “You're sexier when you're free.”

Giving it only another second of consideration, as though testing whether or not Axel would prevent him, Roxas snatched up the dagger and closed the drawer in the same fluid motion. He dared Axel with his eyes, but rather than advise him to leave it behind, Axel only grinned and walked out of the Captain's quarters.

He'd leave him to it, without any apparent fear that Roxas would get away. He might try, but it wouldn't be successful. If Roxas had learned anything... He wouldn't risk his life, for nothing.

Roxas debated whether or not to follow Axel out, and then entertained the possibility – however
fleeting, and however fruitless – of commandeering a lifeboat, with his riches. The daydreams didn't last any longer than it took for light to catch on another shimmery object, and Roxas lifted everything else with a shine that he could still fit on his person.

There was no feasible way of carrying everything. Perhaps he'd drop it in the ocean, he thought vindictively. If nothing else, he didn't want them to profit too greatly.

He'd gathered an entire armful of things to scatter to the sea floor, by the time he crept out of the quarters. Roxas wasn't sure whether or not he was alone, on the burning ship, but the fire had started to catch on the weather-dampened mast and spread slower than he would have thought it would. He was fortunate he'd left before things started getting too hot.

“Carrying enough?”

Axel's voice made him start. Roxas turned his head quickly, finding him mid-stride as he came up towards Roxas. He didn't appear to have his hands quite so full, but he was flipping a gold coin over his knuckles with obvious fondness.

“I could have more, if I got help,” Roxas replied, eyes following the coin until a warm, salty breeze across his face parted the choking dryness of the smoke, however briefly. Suddenly, he was in the moment.

On the sea, under the sun, comfortable weight in his clothing and his arms. Exhilaration flooding him, and the outside air making every breath feel fresh and new.

He'd nearly forgotten what living felt like.

“You could have much more,” Axel's voice, among the gentle crash of waves and the crackling of burning, made Roxas all the warmer. “If you were part of the crew.”

That snapped him back to the harshness of reality. “I-...”

Defiance died on his tongue as he took in the sight of Axel properly, without the excitement to distract from the blood on his clothes. There were dark droplets flecked across his face, on his hands. The gold he was toying with was stained.

Beyond him, Roxas could see Saix and the unknown rose-haired man, cutting the throats of screaming and sobbing men. Too quick and too clean for either sadist's liking, but the Never Was crew would leave no survivors.

Suddenly, strangely... Roxas felt glad that he'd survived this long.

“I know that,” he concluded, and if his response had taken too long, Axel didn't call him on it.

“Something to consider, before they throw you back in your cell,” Axel arched a brow and flipped the coin, catching it firmly before he sauntered back towards the ship.

Roxas didn't drop the other valuables overboard. He followed him over the plank, back onto The Ship That Never Was.

Demyx's eyes went round as he pulled the plank back on deck, plainly at a loss for what to do about the fact that Roxas was walking as freely as the rest of them. He hadn't been the only one to have missed it, or overlooked him – Larxene lit up, but she sounded sharp as she called for the Superior's attention. Marluxia meticulously wiped the blood from his blade, appraising Roxas with lofty interest.
Roxas didn't break stride, as though he wasn't disturbed by being the focus of twelve sets of luminous eyes. He held his head high and carried the goods, as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world, but he kept alongside Axel.

Saix's nostrils flared, flicking blood from pointed claws. The quick, clean deaths hadn't sated his bloodlust, and he looked immediately to Xemnas, on-edge for the order to cause more destruction. To kill.

The Superior looked all too ready to give it, too.

“I can explain this,” Axel breezed. Behind him, the fires flared and began consuming the other ship faster.

“Do so,” Xemnas spoke through his teeth, unimpressed. “You will be flogged, regardless, but it may determine who I have do it.”

Roxas bit his tongue. He hadn't immediately been seized and punished, and he was starting to hope he might not be. He'd be shoved back in his cell... he prayed it wouldn't be with the body...

“I didn't let him out. One of them did,” Axel jerked his head towards the blackening mast. “Check the cell, his corpse is still there. Might even still be warm.”

“I'll be sure to verify that,” Xemnas warned. His eyes flickered to Roxas, only giving him one second of consideration before he looked to Saix and nodded.

Axel's stomach seized, and Saix's pupils dilated.

Roxas didn't appear to know that his death had just been sanctioned.

“Captain-...” Axel was shoving the blonde, pushing Roxas partway behind himself. With a resounding clatter, a heavy gold trinket slipped from Roxas's sleeve and rolled away. For a instant of lunacy, Axel considered picking it up for him.

“He was useful,” Axel argued on his behalf, seizing the fact that the fallen treasure had seemingly presented itself as evidence. “He's a natural pirate, really.”

“He's a child who refuses to learn his place. A liability,” Xemnas spoke over him, which was all the go-ahead Saix required. It looked personal, the way he shoved Axel aside to haul Roxas up by the shirt he was wearing, nails catching and ripping the fabric. It dawned on him at once, why Saix had started forward and why he looked so furious about Axel's interference.

Axel's clothing; Saix would recognize it. Axel thought of that too late.

Roxas's feet were off the ground, the armfuls of loot he was carrying dropped when his hands defensively flew to Saix's wrists. Still, he didn't actually struggle, for all the tension turning him to stone.

Where fear and survival instinct should have taken hold, there was an odd... tranquility, about this moment.

Perhaps, in the next he would be torn to pieces, Saix's claws ripping the life out of him until all ended in agony and darkness. It would be a sudden end to a too-short existence.

But in this moment... he was still under the sky, still in the light, smelling the sea and the cool, clean air around him. No longer cowering in the dark and filth, waiting, waiting and wondering whether
the footsteps he heard day and night were heralding his judgement. The inevitability of his demise now was a comfort, in a way.

Sora was out of their grasp, and alive. And today he'd tasted freedom, however briefly. Maybe that was enough.

Roxas closed his eyes.

“Hold.”

Saix stilled.

Slowly, a heavy golden goblet was rolling towards Xemnas's foot and had drawn his eye down to Roxas's haul. It looked implausibly large, more than he could have possibly been carrying only in his arms. Some of it had shaken loose from his pant legs, and maybe out of his sleeve, but it was clear that he'd collected a small fortune all on his own.

Saix's upper lip curled, tempted to deny Xemnas despite the instantaneous gut response to obey. He didn't let him down, but he didn't tear out his throat. He just waited – one beat, two beats, several seconds too long for Axel's liking.

He had no idea what he should do, or even what he wanted to. Axel had already been promised a beating, and if he allowed every punishment to dissuade him from what he desired...

“Boy,” Xemnas addressed Roxas. “Where did you get all of this?”

“The moon,” Roxas flattened his tone, and was immediately struck across the face hard enough to make his jaw rattle.

His eyes were open now. The moment had been broken, and the peace he’d made with his death lost.

“He's good at picking a place over,” Axel defended, quick to speak over Roxas’s foolish defiance. “Took it all from the Captain's quarters in no time flat.”

Xemnas snapped his fingers in Xigbar's direction, having him pick up the goblet and put it in the Captain's hands. Eyeing it critically, Xemnas took slow steps forward, inspecting Roxas briefly as he passed him and stopping in front of Axel.

Axel was scarcely shorter than him, but Xemnas held himself as though he were several heads taller and spoke to him as though he were no bigger than a flea.

“You have an attachment to this boy,” he said, and there was no trace of accusation this time. It was bald-faced fact, and Axel wouldn't be allowed to argue it. “You have made it no secret.”

“It's as I've told you before, Captain. I have a weakness for blondes,” Axel didn't look away. He couldn't break his gaze, or back down. “He'll be useful, Superior.”

“Perhaps. If he were broken. However...” Xemnas broke their staring match to find Saix's eyes, instead. “He seems to have a little too much spine.”

Saix hauled Roxas towards the mast and slammed his back against it.

“Agh!” Agony flared up his wounds, attitude crumbling in the face of such pain. His eyes stung and watered, head stinging as it cracked against the wood, more gold shaken out of his clothing. It hurt
too much to care.

“I'll keep him.”

Axel spoke out of impulsiveness. Xemnas obviously hadn't expected that, and his eyes narrowed.

“...You'll vouch for him, will you?” he challenged. “Share in his punishments? Take responsibility for his actions? And if he misbehaves, crosses any lines...”

“I'd be happy to kill him, myself.”

He'd realized how terrible of an idea this was until it was far too late. Axel cursed himself; he was better at plotting for the long haul, looking ahead and waiting for the perfect moment. This was anything but opportune.

“My, you are fond of him,” Xemnas intoned.

“If I may, Captain, he is positively devoted,” Saix growled, grip tightening. He'd broken the skin of Roxas's shoulders, but the pain still wracking his back and head was a far more pressing concern.

He was hardly listening to Axel's exchange, the debate over his life.

“Indeed. Why is that, Axel?”

Throwing the briefest of resentful looks Saix's way, Axel heaved a sigh, unnecessarily dramatic. “That's going a bit far, Captain, all due respect. I see potential in him, and – obviously – I wouldn't mind having him under me.”

Xemnas's expression curdled slightly in displeasure, but he didn't express it. He couldn't tell what he was thinking at all, for several moments.

“...Very well. He's yours.”

Axel stood up straighter, and tried not to look as taken aback as he felt. Saix was glowering at him meaningfully, the casual observer thinking he was merely displeased over a lack of violence. Roxas was dropped, almost slipping and harming himself further when his feet made contact with the slick surface of the deck.

Faintly uncertain, Axel went to haul Roxas up, wordlessly promising to discuss the matter later with Saix.

“Your flogging will come later tonight,” Xemnas informed him, observing them as Roxas reflexively clung to Axel's side as he was pulled along. “Administered by Marluxia.”

Marluxia could have purred, at that, and Axel was certain he'd heard him. At least someone would enjoy it, he grimaced, and looked back 'round to nod and acknowledge with a, “Yes, Cap'n.”

Xemnas began calling orders to the other crewmen – drop the sail, haul the anchor, change the current and the wind. Axel ignored it all, focusing on his current charge, half leading, half hauling him below deck, down a narrow corridor in the direction of his quarters.

Roxas wasn't paying attention to where they were going. The past few minutes were a whirlwind, but what it amounted to was not going back to that cell. Even if he was trapped on a ship of inhuman creatures, and with Axel... It certainly felt more like being free.

“Thanks to your mouth, I'm going to have the muscle stripped right off my back.”
Axel's voice was no more than a hiss, but Roxas wasn't affected.

“'We'll match.’

“That's sweet,” Axel stopped dead, turning and backing him towards the wall with a grip on his forearms. He was mindful of the cuts that had been left, but his grip was tight. “Listen. Saix is looking for reasons to kill you, and I can guarantee you he'll draw it out. He'll make it as long and painful as he likes, unless Xemnas tells him otherwise, and if you haven't noticed? He doesn't like you.”

“Do you think that's a reason that will make me want to be submissive to them?” Roxas scowled.

“There's submissive, and then there's cooperative,” Axel glared. “I'm not exactly meek, but they haven't killed me yet... And that's only partially because we're not sure if we can be killed.”

“Why should I be cooperative? I am not one of you, and I'm not afraid of death.” He'd lasted longer than he'd imagined he could.

“Really?” Axel scoffed. “Nothing to live for, even though your brother's alive?”

“My odds of ever getting off this ship to find him don't seem to tip the balance,” Roxas spat.

Axel's hands slipped a little farther down his arms, and pulled him away from the wall. His patience with Roxas was at its end, and they weren't so far from his cabin, now.

The hull (impossibly big) and the crew (improbably small) was a combination that condoned privacy. Axel had a cabin of his own, and he valued it greatly at the best of times. This was an occasion he was all the more glad for the privacy, shoving Roxas into his bedroom and kicking the door shut behind him.

Roxas stumbled, catching himself against the bed. He might have protested or said something spiteful, were Axel not locking the door and looking at him in a way he'd never seen before.

He looked...cold. Still bloodied, eyes narrowed and shining, and a handful of flame wrapping around one of his hands.

“Fine,” he stepped forward. “Then should I kill you now?”

Roxas didn't move. Even knowing he was a monster, he'd never been so threatening. “You're not serious -”

Axel advanced on him, taking hold of Roxas's neck with his other hand – it was too warm, for flesh, it could have seared him – and he held the flames up, too close to Roxas's face, all emotion smoothed from his own. “Open wide. You'll die faster if I burn you from the inside out.”

His wits came back to him. The silver knife hadn't been dislodged; he drew it in a flash, pressing the blade against the hand holding him.


“But I will not submit easily to living or dying,” Roxas pressed the blade against Axel's wrist a bit harder. “I'll die fighting, if you don't mind.”

He couldn't believe that he’d been prepared to feebly accept Saix putting an end to him only
moments ago. The thought of allowing these creatures to choose when he lived or died was sickening.

“Then what do you want?” Axel arched one eyebrow. “Do you just want to be thrown back in the cell until you rot?”

Roxas paused, only in the span of a breath, and mustered the harshest tone he could. “All I want... is to be everything that you pirates despise.”

Axel mulled that over, unable to stop a grin from spreading over his face too-wide. “You'll never succeed. You're too much like us...”

The flames flickered and died, and the burning hand grazed Roxas's jaw. He fought reflex, scowling rather than jerk away from him.

“And this pretty face? I'll always like that.”

Roxas grit his teeth. His hand was too hot... It was beginning to hurt.

They stayed locked, in that position, until Axel's expression turned bitter. “I must be going insane, putting anything on the line for a pretty face and blonde hair,” he scowled, and relinquished his hold. “I have Demyx for that...”

Roxas scarpered back, onto the ragged mattress, tense. Axel watched him move, hands dropping to his sides.

“...I just...saw something in you that I liked,” he sounded tired.

Roxas didn't speak, nor move. He followed Axel with his eyes, but there was no predicting what his next move would be; Axel hadn’t seemed the sort to do him real harm, up until this point, in spite of everything he was... Or wasn’t. After all he’d done in the effort of keeping Roxas alive, to end it this way was far too unlike even what little he knew of the pirate. If the outburst had been an act... It had been awfully convincing.

The mattress creaked, unused to the weight of two people, but it wasn't enough warning. Roxas's heart leapt to his throat, holding up his hands against Axel's chest as he crawled over top of him.

He'd spoken of touching Roxas before, and had, but at a time like this -

“You aren't seriously thinking -”

“You may not last until tomorrow,” Axel knocked Roxas's hand aside, fingers snaking down his chest to the hem of his shirt. Without warning, he was lifting it, dragging his fingers over skin. Roxas slid back, sitting up a bit and glaring.

“I see chivalry has just died.”

“Pirate.”

Axel's lips were at his neck, but whether it was welcome or not, Roxas couldn't clearly say. He didn’t know what he wanted, now.

What he did know was that he didn't want to be burned. He tilted his head away, and cooperated when Axel pulled the shirt up over his head.
“...You would push me away if you didn't want it,” Axel tossed the shirt aside, kissing the spot on his neck that had lit Roxas's nerves afire the last time.

Roxas gritted his teeth, only speaking when he was sure he could breathe again, “Is that an expectation, or justification?”

“A guess, that I know you well enough by now.” Axel was moving back until his knees were on the floor, hands running up the rough material of his pants. He was taking them away, unlacing them with only one crooked finger, tugging them down his hips and all the way down his thighs.

Roxas put himself up on his elbows, watching with a mite of apprehension. Axel was working fast, though, not even taking his softened cock in hand before it was swallowed to the hilt.

The rush of sensation blacked out all other senses, for a second. Roxas was dimly aware of his own voice, but he wasn't listening to what he said. It probably wasn't even a word. The heat floored him, Axel's mouth gentle and his tongue methodical, movements slow but thorough and constant. Roxas didn't have a reprieve to form a single thought, gripping the bed for want of something else as his blood ran south.

Then Axel began to hum softly, and Roxas twitched up against his mouth. “Ah...”

His breaths were coming quicker, reduced to panting and becoming dizzy. Axel wasn't even using his hands, yet.

The feeling of Roxas's cock getting heavier and thicker was immensely satisfying, and he tried to limit the opportunities he had to rock his hips. Axel relaxed his throat and swallowed him right down, again – considerably more difficult, now that he was properly aroused – and he held Roxas's hips down with little strength, just wanting to make moving difficult for him.

He didn't break his rhythm until Roxas was straining up against his hands and his cock was desperately erect. Open-mouthed kisses lavished against the head and the base given teasing, short strokes with a warm hand.

Roxas couldn't stop moving, flushed and breathing hard enough to hurt his chest. His thoughts were an addled mess, the rational part of him still wondering if he should have protested steadily being smothered under every nerve’s demand for more pleasure. Perhaps it wasn’t worth rationalizing. If this was still a power game, if it ever was...

It didn’t matter. He was close; it might have been embarrassing, but he'd never been treated this way. He wanted...

“Want me to stop?”

Roxas needed a moment to understand what Axel was asking, vision clouded. “Stop...?”

“If it's too much.” Axel's lips shone a little, reddened, distracting, that much more so when he licked them. “Or... I could finish you, this way. Or, I could go further...”

The idea of actually allowing someone to -

It was entirely unfamiliar, especially considering... “A minute ago, you were threatening to burn me to death,” he said slowly.

“A minute ago, you wanted to die,” Axel's lips were closer to his length, again, radiating warmth. “What do you want now?”
Axel's tongue ran in a line up from tender sack to the crown of his cock, making Roxas choke and seize the tatty bedcovers again.

“Go on.” Axel's voice was an erotic rumble and Roxas could feel it, in that warm place in his gut. “What'll it be?”

“I...” Roxas caught his breath. “I'm still not convinced you aren't some monster that will steal something from me, if I allow this...”

He laughed. He was still close enough that Roxas could feel his breath, his words. “What more do you think I want?”

“Isn't that supposed to be obvious?” Genuine confusion muddled his lust, writ upon his face as Axel came back onto the bed to straddle his thighs.

“Not really,” Axel sounded far too amused, hand gliding over his stomach and towards his chest.

“It probably is just a superstition,” Roxas rolled his eyes, unconsciously going still to allow him to touch and feel. His sides were briefly teased, too high up to tickle, and thumbs brushed purposefully over his nipples. Axel leaned into him, lips caressing his nape.

“Do tell.”

“Why-...” Roxas's voice broke, to his annoyance, melting under him. “Why should I...”

“I'm interested to know what people think we do... Am I supposed to devour you? Steal your soul?”

There was a hand around Roxas's erection, again, stroking him now and going far, far too slow. Roxas's chest rose and fell out of tandem with Axel's teasing, breaths faster and shorter as he was coaxed back to the brink. “The ones like you... They take away your will... Make those they seduce into mindless slaves...”

Axel was starting to move down, again. His tongue flicked over the nipples he'd so-briefly abused, kissing them before he spoke. “I like you fiery.”

His mouth was so wonderfully fucking warm.

“I just also prefer you alive.”

“Your choice of words isn't – nn...” Roxas bit down on a whimper, as Axel's teeth grazed him. “...Inspiring.”

His chest felt cold, without Axel's proximity. Without his mouth. He was sitting up, holding himself over Roxas like he was going to pull away. “Well? Would you rather I stop, then, or do you want to take the risk?”

Roxas normally wasn't so indecisive. He wasn't sure of his desire, still...

But it irritated him greatly that Axel would stop now, work him to this point and not finish what he started. He hooked an arm around the back of his neck, pulling Axel down into a forceful kiss.

Axel met his vehemence with a purr, repositioning himself to give Roxas more control while blindly reaching for the bedside table. Roxas hardly noticed, too intent on urging the kiss deeper and flanking Axel's hips to press them closer. He was pulling away too soon for Roxas's liking, wresting a frustrated sound out of him. Roxas craned his neck a little as he was moved, knees farther apart and
hips canted, but he didn't get the opportunity to see what Axel was doing.

One oil-slicked finger pressed to his hole, invading him shallowly and startling Roxas enough to make him shout. Unthinking, he grabbed one of Axel's arms crushingly tight.

“Just relax,” Axel coaxed, and didn't move. He was being careful, gentle, and Roxas's breaths slowed again as the surprise faded and understood that nothing monstrous or horrible was happening.

The tension eased. Roxas let Axel kiss him, hard and hot and only lasting for a second. “So skittish,” Axel breathed, starting to slide his finger in deeper. He crooked it, rotated it slowly, as Roxas tried to adjust his position until it was less strange.

“Nn... You-...you would be, too,” he argued.

“In your position, or in your position?”

Axel's finger teased something, and Roxas stopped breathing. The way that felt, an abrupt jolt that was so startlingly hot he almost panicked -

“Ah, h-hey...”

“If you want me to stop, just say so,” Axel watched him intently, a second oiled finger nudging and teasing him further open. He didn't press it in alongside the first, waiting for an indication.

“Just give me a moment, will you? This isn't easy to get used to,” Roxas hit Axel's arm, still breathing wrong, but letting himself be irritated rather than anxious.

“Whatever you say.”

Axel went still, and Roxas shifted almost constantly. Hips higher, hips lower; legs moving together a bit or spreading wider. It did nothing to change how odd it felt, though the sensation had ceased to be uncomfortable.

His heart rate was becoming normal, again... His breathing, however, was no less ragged. There was no fixing that; despite it all, he was still hard. Roxas's eyes went to Axel's face, but somehow, he didn't expect that he'd meet his eyes.

Brilliant green.

And the most perfect blue Axel had ever seen, he thought again, openly admiring. It made Roxas blush, which was all the more pleasing, even though it sparked Roxas's ire again.

“It's okay,” Roxas's eyes narrow defensively. “I'm fine, now.”

Immediately, like he'd been aching from having to keep still, he moved his finger against his prostate again and muttered, “You're sure?”

Roxas inhaled sharply and bucked his hips – he forgot what the pleasure had been like, didn't realize it would be that good. Axel drew his finger back slowly, thrusting it back in and working the second finger alongside it with practiced gentleness.

“Well, that sounded sure,” he teased. Roxas couldn't snipe at him when his words were choked off.

Axel went slow. He didn't spend all his focus against Roxas's prostate, not wanting to overstimulate or push him to his climax, but it was frequent enough to keep every part of him interested and distracted. The odd feeling only got more and more prevalent, muscles mostly relaxed when Axel
was giving him pleasure, but quick to regain a bit of nervous tension.

“I don’t know if you're doing that on purpose, or if you're just not as good as you think you are,” Roxas growled, hips shifting in an attempt to get his fingers backthere, against that spot he hadn’t known about, the one that made his vision swim.

“I don't want you to come too fast,” Axel smirked, but obliged him. It wasn't much, but the soft pressure on his prostate again was bliss.

“It's your problem, if I do,” Roxas gripped his arm tight, again, sinking against his hand.

“Anyone ever told you that you're a little selfish, in bed?”

“Obviously not.”

Something a little smug passed over Axel's face, at that – he hadn't honestly expected or known whether or not Roxas was a virgin, but knowing he was did make it all the sweeter. He was more mindful as he stretched him with the third finger, teasing his sweet spot incessantly now.

"Ngh!

“Stay relaxed... You're already so tight, as it is,” Axel tried to soothe him, words almost winding up lost when Roxas pulled him into another kiss – light, not so hard or deep or intense as the others. It could have been chaste, were he not opening him up at the same time. It might have even been affectionate, coupled with Axel's gentility, were it not for the fact that neither of them were sure how much Roxas was really agreeing to this.

When the nature of the kiss shifted, though, it was entirely Roxas's doing. It became hot and needy before he even knew how it got to that point, wanting more and faster because he was building rapidly towards an even better feeling, now – he was getting some presence of mind back, remembering the way he was trained to move and ‘dance’ at the tavern. Roxas mimicked himself, from then, movements sensual against Axel's body and eliciting a groan.

“You think-...” Axel interrupted himself – or maybe Roxas did – with his lips, back against each other's, until he couldn't bear waiting without asking. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Roxas panted. “Sure. Just so you know, I'll be thinking about treasure the whole time.”

Axel's eyes flickered to his gold hair. “So will I.”

Roxas stared, and suddenly all he could see of Axel was the man he met in the tavern. The one who'd upended his purse, looked at him as though he was something precious beyond measure, who offered to take him away from everything. His eyes were wide, contrary to the way his nervousness had faded to nonexistence.

Axel's lips were at his throat, again, and his fingers eased out of him one by one. Roxas watched him discard his own clothing, far too late for his liking, and stroke the oil onto his shaft until he was slick with it. Their eyes met again, no hesitation left, and Axel brought him up into his lap.

His nerves came crashing back down on him when Axel guided himself inside and the pressure seemed to fill him right to the core.

“Axel -”

Roxas didn't honestly expect that he'd stop. It took a grunt of exertion to keep himself from pressing
all the way inside that so inviting heat, but Axel looked up at him, searching for pain or regret or any other sort of indication that he wanted Axel out of him.

He didn't expect that kind of concern, either. Roxas couldn't remember why he'd stopped him, in the first place, apart from a knee-jerk reaction to strangeness. The feeling wasn't bad, though, now that he'd had a second to place it. Roxas's breath caught, on his first attempt to speak.

“Nn-... Never mind.”

One of Axel's hands slid along his leg, then over his hip. He kept Roxas in his lap, despite the momentary idea that he should pull out, give him some time to decide whether or not he could really take it.

Roxas was stubborn, though. He'd lie, if it would urge Axel to get on with it and cover any sign of weakness.

“Just relax and enjoy it,” Axel murmured, instead. “You don't have to do anything...”

He wrapped his hand around Roxas's cock, and moved it up slowly as he slid the rest of the way inside.

Both the heat and discomfort amounted to so much sensation that Roxas shuddered, clung to him, almost squeaked but he prayed that it would be immediately forgotten. That blissful spot inside him was outside of Axel's reach – not from this angle, not with his length. There was something else to it that was good, and Axel moved slow enough for him to enjoy the drag of friction from inside. He wished the hand would move faster, the one that was still a little slick and running over his cock in perfect tandem with his thrusts, but...

He felt like his body was buzzing, and warm in a way he never had before. He didn't quite know how he felt about being so filled, but good or bad or both, he didn't care to think about it. Not when it was still sex, and still what he wanted right now. Axel's mouth claimed his, motion of his hips on hold while he did so, and Roxas lingered over it even though he was impatient. He groaned, when he couldn't take any more waiting, and could have throttled him when he felt Axel smirk.

Axel took his cues, the more Roxas relaxed. He rocked into him shallowly, at first, but began to move his hips to thrust a little deeper, a tiny bit faster. The rhythm between his hips and his hand was broken, becoming more entranced with doing whatever made Roxas twitch the most. Faster, then faster, then slower, then slow.

Roxas was coming to the steady realisation that he wasn't afraid to enjoy it, anymore. The only thing to conflict with how good everything was was his own inaction; he refused to just lie back and take it, even if that wasn't what he was doing in the strictest sense. His legs moved, spreading wider, hooking around his waist. Axel's quiet groan was one of the most rewarding things he'd ever heard.

It was easier to move into him, like this. Axel paused briefly, sheathed inside him, more white-hot euphoria racing through his veins and bowling over his self-control.

“Ah-...” Roxas shook, grabbing at Axel's shoulder when his pace picked up – too sudden, too hard.

“Hey-!”

Axel stroked his hand up Roxas's cock, forcing himself slow again in instantaneous response. He could barely scrape two thoughts together, and wanted to say so, but had no idea how to articulate it.

Roxas’s legs, which had crushed around him almost bruisingly when he grabbed him, were relaxing again, opening up a little. He took that as a good sign.
“...You okay if I...?”

“Yeah, it's... I mean, not so...”

Axel stole a kiss from him, hand faintly tight around Roxas's erection for a second before he all but lifted him by his ass, prompting him higher until Axel could lie back on the bed. He slipped out of him, in the process, and feeling empty was almost as bizarre as having Axel inside of him.

He was using more oil, though, thrusting in smoothly when he was satisfied and achieving a different angle with Roxas on top of him. His head tilted back, awash with pleasure. “Shit -”

Axel was going slow, again, and at first he thought it was to tease. He couldn't thrust all the way inside, like he could before, but...

When he hit it again, it was so much better and Roxas didn't care. Axel couldn't get to his prostate the same way as he could with his fingers, but the burning memory of that feeling and the tactile reminder – it was enough to make him moan, loud.

Axel stroked him faster, now, jerking his cock and losing his tempo every so often but neither of them cared.

Roxas shouted, with his orgasm, the force of it leaving him shaky. He'd only lasted a few more of those thrusts and a slight twist of Axel's hand, and the empty feeling Axel left was comfortable in the afterglow.

Axel stroked himself, pace merciless compared to how he'd touched Roxas, but he didn't meet his climax until Roxas kissed him. He spilled himself between their bodies, strength ebbing away with his high and not returning even as it lazily receded.

They stretched out beside one another, avoiding putting Roxas on his back, and closed their eyes until they felt like they could move again, several minutes later. Roxas wasn't letting thought sink in, basking in the feeling of being spent and reaching idly over Axel to pick up a gold coin.

It had fallen from his clothing, when Axel had stripped him. He exhaled contentedly, admiring it. It took Axel no time to notice.

“You're such a pirate,” he muttered, amused.

Roxas was too exhausted to be affected by the comment, rubbing the gold between his fingers.

Axel grinned, shifting a bit closer and kissing down his jaw, words escaping between each one. “Next time... Assuming you don't get yourself killed, before then... I'll lay you down on a bed of gold coins and take you on that, instead...”

Unconsciously, Roxas licked his lips. “I could get used to that idea.”

With a smirk, Axel's lips trailed higher until he grazed his forehead, speaking when he had half-buried himself against Roxas's hair. “Gold suits you. Shame you hate our lifestyle, so much.”

His eyes flickered upwards, surprised. He wouldn't have thought anyone like him to be capable of affectionate gestures, however false.

“...If gold was all you pirates were after... I might have to consider.”

He didn’t know if he meant it. He knew he was here with Axel now, sore but pleasantly worn out.
He knew he had come close to freedom, closer to death, but was neither free nor dead now. What all of it meant was beyond him.

But perhaps the knowing was better saved for another day.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay, everyone, we had a busy week and fell a bit behind. We hope the porn was worth it. Next Monday should put us back on schedule.
Rousing was a more painful affair than Roxas would have anticipated. Having a mattress to sleep on was a novelty, to be sure, but his back still ached and there was a brand new soreness lacing up his muscles. He hadn't been this sensitive, when he'd fallen asleep beside...

Axel.

He hadn't redressed after Roxas drifted off, however much longer that had taken. He also hadn't carried out his threat of murder, Roxas noted dryly, so that was certainly encouraging.

Axel's breath was slow and even. He hadn't woken, even stirred, his arm still loosely draped over his bed mate's waist. If he'd held him all night, that certainly explained why he hadn't gotten cold. Even without the fire, Axel gave off heat in steady waves.

It was almost a shame to slip away, moving without sound and slipping out from under his arm one scant inch at a time.

Axel turned his head into the pillow, inhaling deep, and Roxas froze.

He wasn't waking up... At least, he didn't think he was waking up.

But he waited, to be sure, and slid out of Axel's grasp. The abandoned arm reached up to his pillow, entwining there instead, and Roxas grinned.

Leaving Axel's room wasn't a risk he'd take, now, but that honestly wasn't on his mind one way or another. He had an opportunity he'd never had aboard this ship, before.

There was a trunk at the end of the bed (he'd noted in passing last night, before other distractions set in) and a discarded shirt that looked valuable in its own way. It wasn't the one he'd been loaned, but it didn't occur to Roxas that he might not be welcome to it.

It was in his vicinity. That made it as good as his. He slipped it over his head, stretching until his sore muscles screamed and sinking into the sensation of them relaxing, after. All the while, he didn't even let his breath hitch.

The sort of lock on the trunk was pedestrian, Roxas surmised. He did a quick scan for something slender, kneeling in front of the trunk to inspect the keyhole. Easy. He eased the lockpick in to prod the inner workings into place, jiggling it about carefully to reduce the amount of noise.

It opened with a distinct snap, too loud to Roxas's ears, and Axel's eyes snapped open immediately.

Roxas pushed the lid up with a slow creak, beginning to pluck through it carefully. He wouldn't take everything... but a bit of gold here and there would hardly be missed, and he was practically entitled to a little restitution after everything that had happened.

Axel's consciousness hadn't caught attention yet. He shifted lazily, feigning sleep, and his eyes were closed before Roxas could glance up his way. He'd paused to listen, elbow-deep in the chest, and didn't continue until thirty seconds had passed without Axel moving again.

His eyes opened again slightly, curious to see what he'd deem as valuable.

The first layer of goods were flashy trinkets, Roxas noted with distaste. Deeper, though... He pulled
out a deceptively worn-looking pendant, dangling it a little higher to catch the minimal light.

There was a flash and it shone much brighter, a fistful of flames extended Roxas's way. He jolted, slipping back on the floor with his prize still clutched against his chest. “Pirating from a pirate?” Axel's eyes were wide open, one eyebrow raised.

“... You're awake,” Roxas observed calmly. He'd been caught off guard, true, but once that wore off he doubted he had much to fear. A touch of boldness was usually well-received, in Axel’s case.

Axel's expression was still lax and he dissipated the flames. “You still have good taste.”

“What, this?” The chain slipped over his fingers, a little, Roxas's eyes flicking to the pendant again.

“Obviously, I was referring to myself,” Axel leaned forward and snatched it right out of his hands, to his indignation. He lunged to try to grab it back, halted when Axel threw up a halting hand and chastised, “You're pretty. Don't make me ruin that.”

Roxas rolled his eyes, getting up to crawl back onto the bed. “Can you blame me for knowing the things I want?”

“I can where they're my things.”

“By now, I think you could safely call them our things,” Roxas's eyes narrowed, but he smiled like he was working the room.

“Why, Roxas, you've given me a case of the vapors. I feel like a parlor maid,” he snorted. “So sentimental.”

“Considering I can't go anywhere without you, and you can't leave me unattended, we may as well start sharing everything,” Roxas argued, and reached for the pendant again. Irritatingly, Axel kept it out of his reach, seizing the opportunity and his waist.

“How sweet.”

Roxas's smile didn't falter. “I gave you something nice, didn't I?”

“Not nice enough for me to start sharing everything.” He was holding Roxas tightly to keep him still, and holding the pendant well out of reach.

“That almost sounds like a challenge.”

“If it is,” Axel's smirk was wolfish, “will you rise to it?”

“That depends what the guarantee is like...” He shifted into Axel's lap, nonetheless. He was still sore, but in the strangest way, he didn't think he minded the idea of indulging, again. Roxas might not even need to, if Axel would just let his guard down...

“You're after this, right?” Axel swung the gold like a pendulum, but it still wasn't in reach.

“Unless you have something better.”

“That's all relative, isn't it?” Axel purred. “Treasure isn't limited to shiny objects.”

Roxas raised his eyebrows, having no need to ask 'where are you going with this?'

“Not the pendant,” his lips were close, kiss just ghosting by. “I can sneak you into the others' rooms.
Let you rummage around in there, for a while.”

That...was an interesting offer, one he hadn't expected. Roxas almost drew back to look him in the eye, wanting to gauge how truthful he was being.

“... How do I know I can trust you?”

“You're offering me treasure,” Axel's lips were just a little closer, skimming over Roxas's. “It's a mutually beneficial agreement.”

He was more inclined to believe Axel, when he spoke that way. “I suppose there is logic, there...”

“So? Do you need time to think it over? The offer won't last forever.”

Roxas's eyes went from Axel's face to the pendant, and back. “... A deal with a pirate. I may never forgive myself.”

“It's remarkable, the pains that gold can take the edge off of,” the hand on Roxas’s waist started to run lower.

“Mm, I suppose my judgment can't be counted on at the moment, anyway...”

“I'll take that as a 'yes',” Axel almost growled, beginning to feel the stirrings of arousal. He was tempted to pin him to the bed, flat on his back, but he'd need to come up with an alternative...

After he'd finished kissing Roxas. If he ever planned on finishing, which was increasingly unlikely, the more Roxas kissed him back.

He was only dressed in Axel's shirt, the one he'd worn yesterday... There were rips and stains, yet that didn't take away from the fact that seeing him in his clothing felt possessive. He liked that feeling. Axel reached backwards, letting the chain slip out of his hand to let it clatter to the floor, well out of reach. Roxas followed it's descent, but didn't protest; his hands went to Axel's back, sliding up slowly.

Deep, fresh scars. They almost startled Roxas out of his haze. They hadn’t been there last night, how could-?

The punishment Xemnas had ordered. He didn't remember Axel leaving the bed, nor did he recall him coming back in... Had he slept the whole night through?

They'd been tended to, and Axel didn't flinch under his hands...

Roxas's nails scratched along his shoulders, the only place unmarred. It didn't sound like it was too much pain for him, when Axel groaned and adjusted the way they connected – he was almost grinding up into Roxas, and it was either that or the sound of Axel's voice that sparked restlessness under his skin.

He thought they'd reprise last night, but Axel had different intentions for their position, easing Roxas onto his back with his pillow positioned to keep him from sinking too much weight against the old wounds. He'd healed over well, but...

The soreness from last night made him wince, still.

Axel didn't give him much time to concentrate on it. He nipped Roxas's lower lip, moved down to devour his throat. Hands on his legs urged them to spread just enough, and Roxas willingly moved to
let him settle between them. Axel's warmth sank into his skin, heating him to the core and making him much more amenable to helping him take the shirt off. He tried to move instinctively against the heat, legs sliding up and pressing into Axel's sides. He was sucking at Roxas's collarbone, then his chest, while his fingers moved lazily up and down his thighs.

It felt like teasing, and Roxas wasn't in the mood. “Hey...” he groaned, halfway in complaint, and bucked his hips up hard.

“Keep still, or I may spontaneously stop,” Axel warned, pressing his palms flat and seizing the sides of his ass.

“I don't believe that,” he breathed, but he stopped squirming.

“You sure about that?” More kisses, at his nipples and down his stomach. “I could always get myself off and leave you helplessly pinned to my bed... I can't say that doesn't have an appeal...”

“If you were happy doing that, you wouldn't be going to all the trouble...”

Axel's mouth lifted off him. “You're underestimating how much I love to be cruel.”

Unwillingly, Roxas hesitated.

“Can't trust a pirate, after all,” he reminded him with a purr. “So, will you let me do as I please, or are you going to continue being difficult?”

The greatest irritation was that Roxas didn't want him to stop, and was being essentially bullied into admitting as much. He scowled faintly, “Go ahead, then.”

Axel opened his mouth, dragging it over his skin in a direct route down to his cock. He swallowed the length down with his lips forming a tight ring around the base. The teasing was done and Roxas was grateful for that, finding nothing to grab onto but Axel's hair.

He was moving fast, and Roxas was given no choice but to hold on for all he was worth and take it, searing heat almost breaking the focus it took to keep still. He wanted to thrust greedily into his mouth, but thank god, Axel wasn't giving him much reason to. He was falling in sync with Roxas's breathing, in fact, and echoing sounds of pleasure with vibrating moans.

Roxas could tell there was an underlying rhythm to it, but couldn't piece together two thoughts to recognize it. He was paying as much attention to it as he could, small, catching groans getting higher and breathier the more Axel responded to them...

But the price of concentration was that his breathing became slower, a bit more even, and Axel mercilessly slowed his pace.

“Ah -” Roxas's expression twisted, incensed, and Axel echoed the sound around his cock. “Are you mocking me?”

Axel purred, low in his throat. It was harder to compose himself enough to be angry, when he did that.

“You dirty-...”

Even the attempt at irritation amused Axel, drawing off of him just to snicker and altering the course of his plans the moment his mouth was free.
“If you dare stop now, I will -”

“Relax,” Axel soothed, fingers skimming Roxas's cock. His own was heavy and fighting for attention of its own, and he could see no reason why they shouldn't both get what they wanted. Settling over Roxas to align with him would have been less absurd, if he could have pulled him on top... But as it was, the gashes on Axel's back prickled with pain even when he wasn't moving, so he wouldn't risk it.

He loomed over Roxas's smaller body, holding himself up and reaching down with one hand with his fingers splayed open. It spanned wide enough to gently grasp them both and press them together, Roxas's erection left wet enough to ease the strokes. His palm was rougher against himself, but he didn't mind.

The smooth stiffness against his cock was better, anyway.

Roxas canted his hips slowly, ire allayed, trying to find purchase on Axel's body without grabbing at his back. Directly contrary to the desperation of a moment ago, this felt like it should be slower, sensual, a sort of dance the two of them were doing that sent an incessant stream of sparks through Roxas's body. He was close to his orgasm, but it felt more like he was being coaxed over the edge instead of pulled off of it.

His moan was smaller but no less heartfelt, when he spilled into Axel's hand and over his cock. He mouthed up towards his throat, when Axel came too, a minute later.

Roxas didn't mention the pendant after, even though his mind was set right back on the promise of treasure.

Axel did wonder if he'd essentially bartered to have Roxas moved to a more comfortable cell. As Xemnas had given no instruction as to what Roxas should do, he hadn't been yet permitted to leave the quarters. Axel had stuck himself with Demyx's former task, of ferrying food and checking in on their prisoner.

He'd had to make sure his trunk was locked up tighter. No doubt that was keeping Roxas occupied, at least, assuming he'd given up on the door. Axel had locked him in, but there was an equal chance that he hadn't even noticed. If Roxas could break out, and avoid getting lost in the hull... Well, he knew it to be a death sentence, until someone said otherwise.

There had only been a short time today that Roxas had been escorted from the room, under a watchful eye, and it had been done in secret. To prove that he could make good on his promise, he'd sneaked Roxas into a cabin and kept a lookout while he did a rapid picking-over of the room, only taking one of Vexen's valuables and imparting to Axel later that it was easily the smallest thing of the most value that he'd owned.

Vexen probably wouldn't even miss it, and Axel thought that he could become addicted to the way Roxas worked.

The meal he was carrying was really no less meager than what was being served to their prisoner, before. Axel navigated his way back from their food stores to his room, not expecting that he'd see anyone along the way. The crew, at this time, were individually occupied with tasks on-deck or diversions below. On nights where everything was share and share alike, those 'diversions' would
take place above deck, as well, but Axel had no drive to find out which it was tonight.

He didn't expect to find someone in his way.

Saix shouldn't have been there; really, he was so seldom given permission to stray from the Captain's side, nowadays, that getting a moment alone was a rarity. Axel arched an eyebrow, privately jolted when he stepped out of one of the shadowed nooks to intercept him.

"Axel."

"You should really make more noise, when you skulk," he suggested in jest. Saix's expression didn't change.

"We have to talk."

"Out here?" Axel had already guessed at the subject matter. "I was on my way back to my quarters."

"I see that," Saix's gaze dropped to the tray. "I will join you."

"Alright, but you'd better be gentle with me. I'm not a delicate flower like Marluxia, but I deserve to be wooed."

Again, Saix was stone-faced, following Axel down the corridor to the cabin door. When he reached the door, though, he stopped.

It didn't take Axel very long to weigh his options. He set the tray down in front of the door, determining that he would rather Roxas go hungry for a short while longer instead of potentially exposing the state of him to Saix. He was undoubtedly dressed by now, surely would have clothed himself at some point during the day... But no matter how he looked, Saix knew. He had to know.

Even if he didn't, there was still very real danger.

Axel turned swiftly from the door, lowering his voice. "Your room has been unoccupied for so long, I can't remember where it is. Shall we, or would you rather we speak here?"

It was a question that didn't need an answer, and Saix's cabin was close by. Almost bare, save for the cot and the odd crate; it was well on its way to becoming a storeroom, for all the time anyone ever spent in it. Axel was briefly awash with nostalgia; even when Saix had stayed here, there hadn't been much of anything. It used to be a hard bed and a hard body, one under him and one over him, pitch darkness that didn't stop them from seeing with glowing, probing eyes...

"This distraction is getting out of hand."

The door closed behind them, Saix's tone deadly serious. It was almost as dark as Axel remembered.

"I'm getting him well in-hand, actually," he smirked, but his tone sobered. "He isn't a 'distraction'. Think he could be useful. He's got the makings of a good pirate, with no loyalty to the Captain."

"His loyalty is not what concerns me," Saix's eyes bored into Axel.

"What have I done?"

"You're too attached – and don't pretend you're not," he accused flatly. "This fascination has tested the Captain's patience too many times already. He's beginning to doubt you."

"Is he, or is this coming from you?"
Saix's voice lowered, but for the effect it had, he could have been shouting. “You took responsibility for his crimes, Axel. If he continues to sneak about the ship or make impromptu raids under your supervision, you're as good as a traitor. And I suppose he just found that dagger he carries.”

Axel didn't tense, visibly, but he hadn't expected Saix to know.

Did the Captain know? ... No, he would have been dragged forth, put on display until Xemnas tired of it and wanted him locked in the brig until the end of days. Roxas would have been killed for his impudence and that would have been the end of it all.

He sighed, and shrugged. He wouldn't counter any of Saix's charges. They both would've known it was a lie. “I'll use Demyx to entertain myself, instead. Alright?”

“Remember what we agreed,” Saix warned. “Never at any point should the Captain question our loyalty. Use Demyx if that will keep you occupied, but I need more than that.”

“Should I offer myself to the Captain until he trusts me?” Axel quipped snidely.

Saix caught him by the throat, nails pricking like claws and choking him mid-inhale. The pressure didn't stay, but his hand – and the threat – did.

“...Didn't mean there's anything wrong with that,” Axel exhaled, keeping still. He knew better than try to escape or wrestle out of Saix's grasp.

“The Captain is tiring of your insistence that the boy can be made useful.” Saix stepped closer, voice barely above a growl. “Soon, his patience will be at an end. If he insists the boy be left behind, or thrown to the depths, or ripped to pieces before his eyes... I will not hesitate. And neither will you.”

“Of course.” Axel was barely able to nod.

Saix let him go.

“It will be easier to carry out this plan with you, but do not make the mistake of thinking I need you, if I sense any weakness.”

“I think that's your way of saying you want me to stick around. Becoming whole just wouldn't be as much fun without me,” Axel rubbed his throat lightly, and grinned like he didn't have a knot trying to unravel itself, in his brain. “You're so sentimental.”

“We will speak again soon,” Saix turned away and wrenched the door open, the wood making a sound that meant the hinges had separated and clattering against the door frame as it swung.

It covered the subtle sound of Axel swearing under his breath.

Dawn was cresting over the waves, the water as still as the tides ever allowed. Everything was crisp, so early in the morning; one could have counted the individual rays of the sun as they stretched through gray clouds, and this far out to sea the horizon was a clean line no matter which direction you turned. There was only a single speck to disrupt the view, but that was filled with a promise all of its own.

The speck could only be another ship. Perhaps the Highwind was catching up.
Riku's cheeks had a little more color, kissed by the last cold winds of night. Despite how much sleep he tended to lose, he was feeling more awake and alive than usual... Something he attributed to the late nights he spent with their guest.

Sora still kept stirring, just a tiny bit, and each time he was no less delirious than the last. He would mumble things, but only sometimes comprehensibly and never in a manner that indicated he was aware of his surroundings. He still spoke of rescuing Roxas, and the tavern back at Twilight Town. With some urging, though, he'd talk about Destiny Islands, and of his brother before times became hard.

Riku knew strange little things about him, now. That Sora had once tried to build a raft, thinking he could sail out to see the world on it, but it was destroyed by a storm – not a particularly sturdy raft, then. He'd been told about a cave that Sora called his 'secret place', and that had been where he and Roxas used to go when things were frightening or stressful or sad.

They were unimportant little anecdotes, yet...they stayed with Riku throughout the day, and just thinking about them made him feel lighter. He slept better with the pictures Sora painted still in his head, instead of tactics and charts and missions.

So long as he remained focused during the day, and when his crew needed him in, there was no harm in this. Whatever 'this' was, though Riku couldn't put a word to it.

“Every man should be armed, but I won't have them battle-ready until we receive word from the crow's nest,” he relayed to his second-in-command, planning. “I have no desire to engage any ship but our target, we've lost too much ground. If it looks like they're on-course for us...”

“Prepare the cannons and try to take them down from a distance,” his crewman spoke over the last part of his instruction, but Riku kept his annoyance from flaring.

“I'd rather go through them than around, in this case,” Riku grimly agreed. “If they're pirates, they'll just pursue... Or, perhaps it'd be better to say that if they're stupid pirates, they'll pursue. Even if they are unlawful, if they have any sense, they'll take evasive maneuvers... But this is all assuming that they are not The Ship That Never Was. We can hope.”

“Captain!”

One of his sailors was running up to the helm, snapping into a salute several paces away when Riku turned his head.

“Sent up by the surgeon, Captain,” the sailor reported, rushed. “It's the man, the one found overboard.”

Riku's second had left his side, going to bark the orders at the sailing master, but he didn't quite notice. “He's-?”

“Not just propped up or muttering nonsense, Captain.”

The sun finally broke free of the skyline, and the sky was starting to become blue.

“He's awake.”
Another round of thank you's to everyone reading, and leaving feedback. You're all darlings. If thank you's were beers, we'd be getting you all drunk. In fact, we recommend reading our work drunk.

Sora felt like he'd woken from an unfathomably deep sleep, only to find himself exhausted. There were all manner of strange aches and pains through his body, all the more peculiar in that nothing felt like strain or a wound.

The place he was in was entirely unfamiliar. Even before he opened his eyes, he could tell from the slight rocking that he was on a ship, but there was more embellishment to the walls than there had been on the pirates' ship.

He'd been greeted by a face and a uniform he didn't know, and only spoken to in brief. The man had called to someone else, helped Sora sit up and adjust, but told him nothing. He'd been left with a thick blanket and an overwhelming sense of confusion.

He remembered the waves, and the searing pain across his back. He'd been tended to and dressed – he could feel the slight scratch of fabric against bandages. It was taking him time to piece everything back together, but the fact that someone had bothered to take such pains took away any feeling of danger Sora might've had, when waking up somewhere with a head full of fuzzy nothing.

Pulling at the edges of the blanket to burrow into it, Sora lifted his head to greet the newcomer rushing down to meet him, blinking a few times in an attempt to clear up his grogginess.

He had silver hair. Something about that was familiar... but it was on the outreaches of his mind, not quite accessible. Sora looked up at him, uncomprehending, but offering a smile nonetheless.

Briefly, Riku stared. “...You're awake,” he observed, and could have kicked himself for his obviousness.

There was something about his voice, as well...

Sora knew him, a little. He could feel that, in his gut. “...Captain?” he ventured, trying to place him amidst the muddiness.

To his own surprise, Riku found he could've laughed. In Sora’s more lucid moments, he'd asked, and asked again... Apart from their first meeting, he'd never introduced himself as 'Captain'.

“Not your Captain,” his lips twitched. “You may call me Riku. How're you feeling?”

Sora struggled with words, for a second. “...Better than I was.”

Riku. That touched another chord.

“I'm not surprised,” he nodded. “You've had some time to heal, but the waters were rough that night,
to say nothing of your back...”

His back. Some of the fog went sharp, or perhaps cleared; being whipped, being thrown over the side, and leaving behind -

“Roxas!”

Sora lurched forward, trying to untangle the blanket and throw it behind him. Riku's hands caught him by the shoulders, holding him back firmly.

“You only just woke up,” Riku tried to guide him back. “We're in pursuit, now.”

“My brother...” Sora resisted. “They still have him. He's even worse than me... They're probably – probably doing something... What if he's not...”

“Calm down, Sora,” Riku cajoled. “We've been tracking the ship since we found you. We haven't caught up, but until we do, there isn't anything you can do. Lie back down.”

It didn't soothe his nerves to hear that. Sora bit his lip with a tiny whine.

“...I'm sorry,” Riku managed to coax him into sitting back. “You're conscious, but you're still recovering. You must feel weak, right now... You haven't even eaten anything more than broth, for days.”

He had to admit, Riku wasn't wrong. The ache he was feeling was identifiable, when he put that word to it; weakness. It was dragging him down more effectively than gravity, tiring him to his core. Sora sank against the wall for support.

“... You know my name?”

For the first time, Sora heard how worn his voice was. A little croaky, from more than mere disuse.

“You spoke a little, while you were delirious,” Riku pulled up a chair, by the bedside. “I know your name, and that your brother is still on The Ship That Never Was. At least, I had good reason to believe that was what you were talking about.”

“Captain,” there was a soft knock against the wall, the surgeon balancing Sora's breakfast on a tray to keep it stable. It didn't look like much more than he'd been able to eat, before, but Riku noted there was hardtack and some of the remaining cheese beside the steaming bowl of broth. A standard canteen was hanging from the surgeon's wrist by a strap, too heavy to balance.

“Thank you,” Riku turned, taking the tray. “You're dismissed for the moment, you should get something to eat, yourself.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Sora observed silently, watching the surgeon go and the Captain come back to him, helping him set up with the tray.

“We didn't dock all too long ago, so we still have cheese. The bread may be a little tough, for someone who isn't used to eating it... You can soften it with the broth.”

Food would help; Sora became hyper-aware of the hollow feeling in his stomach. “Thank you, Riku,” he smiled genuinely, but gave the canteen a nervous glance. “This is...?”

“Just water.”
Sora's grin turned sheepish, taking a long swig.

“Do you mind if I ask you some questions about the pirates?” Riku asked, once he'd given him a moment to start eating. “I need to confirm some things, now that you're lucid...”

Nibbling at the tack, Sora nodded. Riku had been right; it was hard on his teeth.

Riku considered the many questions he had, choosing carefully to preserve what mental energy Sora now had. He strained to remember everything he'd tried to ask Sora, before.

“How many people did you see on board?”

“...Apart from my brother and me, there were... I don't know,” Sora frowned, trying to think. “Ten pirates? Or maybe eleven... I think they had all of the crew on deck, when they...”

Riku's jaw set. “I see.”

“...It might not have been all of them?” Something in Riku's expression worried him. He felt like he'd let the young Captain down, in some way.

“You didn't happen to see another prisoner? A girl. Blonde, she would be about...” he held his hand up, “this tall, I think.”

Sora shook his head. “Roxas said we were the only prisoners... Why? Was she someone special to you...?”

“She's the daughter of a very important family, where I'm from. My crew is looking for her... Rather, we have been. For some time, now.”

“Oh,” Sora's spirits diminished, face falling. “I'm sorry. I don't know.”

“Do you have any idea where the Never Was crew are headed? Did you overhear anything, learn anything about their heading?”

Despondently, Sora shook his head.

“...Don't worry. The moment we took you on board, we had a lead,” Riku reassured him. “We've never been this close, before. Inevitably...we will catch them.”

“You think so?” It helped. Riku exuded a particular...confidence.

“I'm sure of it. We have the fastest ship there is, all we've needed is a direction to go in.”

“Do you have any idea where they might want to go, next?” Sora chewed on softened tack and swallowed the last of it down.

“Not entirely. They're unpredictable, and the wind always seems to favor them,” Riku sighed. “When we found you, though, we were given some idea of the direction they're in... It guided us one way, and this morning, our man in the nest saw something we're almost certain is a ship. It may be them. Even if we're not sure of their destination, we have more to go on than ever before.”
“So... You think we can still find Roxy?” Sora hesitated.

“There's hope,” Riku confirmed fondly. “Thanks to you.”

He didn't recognize the warmth for what it was, but Sora brightened, rejuvenated and appetite all the more prominent without worry in the way. He blew on the broth's surface and sipped it as slow as his sensibility allowed.

Riku watched him, feeling strange for knowing Sora could meet his eyes and was entirely aware of him. He could have a real conversation, now...

And he was at an utter loss, for what to say.

“...The tavern you worked at, where they took you from,” Riku tested. “Which place was it?”

Sora faltered, tongue lightly burned, and he set down the bowl. “In Twilight Town...? It was called 'The Usual Spot'... It was for sailors, mostly. It wasn't of, um, very high repute...”

“Evidence showed that the raid started there,” Riku stated. “That will be a strong argument we can give to the crew, to the Admiral, when I report back.”

“Argument...?”

“All any of us knew about you, initially, was that you were a man overboard. You could have been a pirate,” Riku pointed out.

Confusion crossed his face, again. “But, you...”

“You mentioned the raid on Twilight Town, when you were able to speak,” Riku informed him. “I've been able to piece together what happened, somewhat. Except what brought you there. Twilight Town was a long way from home for you, wasn't it...?”

“It – yeah, it was.” He was perplexed, but went on to elaborate anyway. “We were actually from the island countries, but... We had to get work somewhere.”

“No work at home?”

Sora shook his head. “We were shipped out, not long after our parents were gone.”

“Oh,” Riku felt an immediate wash of regret. “I'm sorry.”

Sora forgot his manners, picking up the bowl of soup again. “Do you have parents?”

“My father, yes,” Riku felt odd, talking about things he'd mentioned in passing to Sora, before. “The Admiral. I find it's best not to mention him in the presence of the crew; they still talk about nepotism and the fact that I wouldn't have command of this vessel, were it not for him.”

He hadn't any idea what 'nepotism' meant. Sora nodded anyway, covering his embarrassment. “Er, yeah. Okay. ...You do seem kind of young, for a ship captain.”

It felt unpleasantly more like boasting, when Sora was awake. “The youngest to have ever been appointed. As though he would actually send out a prize vessel under sub-par command...”

“Do you think you deserve to be captain, Riku?”

“Of course,” he replied, without a trace of modesty. “I was better than any of the candidates they
were considering.”

He didn't want to be an unpleasant braggart, he realized, but he was wholly uncomfortable with the idea that Sora wouldn't have faith in him. In his abilities.

... Perhaps he wanted to impress him, a little.

Sora grinned. “Then you've got nothin' to worry about.”

Riku paused. “I suppose I don't,” he smirked back, a little.

“I mean, you saved me,” Sora lifted the canteen to take a drink, smiling at him. “I don't have any complaints.”

“Speaking of which, do you need anything else? You're not still hungry?”

“I'm alright.” It was a half-truth. Sora always felt at least a little hungry, though digesting was a more tiring affair than he was used to.

“If you need anything, feel free to find someone. I'll give my men instructions to accommodate you, until we can get you to shore,” Riku vowed, but the idea didn't sit with him as well as it should have.

When Sora left... He'd have no one to talk to. It was a ridiculous thought; he hadn't really 'talked to' Sora at all. Speaking to a wall would have accomplished the exact same thing, but...

It felt different.

“I'm pretty lucky,” Sora commented with a smile, more relaxed than he thought he could be. The danger Roxas was in was still on his mind, but it didn't feel so immediate when he was among people tirelessly working to track them down.

“You are,” Riku admitted. “The sea was rough, that night. The strength it must have taken to hold on for so long is...really something. But, I'm lucky too.”

“Do you think?”

Riku half-smiled, privately rueful for speaking without thinking. He really did feel fortunate, and didn't know how to put it into words without making himself sound insane. Riku couldn't even explain it to himself.

“...We may finally catch up to them, now... And it's nice having someone around who's closer to my own age.”

“It's kind of weird, the way it had to happen, though,” Sora laughed a little. The more Riku talked, the less the worry prevailed.

“Circumstances could have been better, agreed,” Riku amended.

Sora finished off the canteen, eyes flickering over every part of Riku's face. At first glance, he looked the very picture of what an Imperial Navy sailor should be, carrying himself with confidence and responsibility. But he really was young.

It did nothing to diminish Sora's comfort, or the faith he'd inspired.

“I wouldn't mind sticking with you,” he offered.
“Technically, I can't keep you on board indefinitely,” Riku responded, reluctant to admit it. “Every crewman aboard is a trained soldier. However... It couldn't hurt keeping you here, to provide information. At least until we find your brother.”

“Then...until we find Roxas,” Sora grinned.

“It's a deal.”

Riku extended his hand for Sora to shake, giving him momentary pause before accepting it. He felt he needed to inform Riku, though, “You know, I can fight.”

“Can you? I hope you don't end up having to prove it.”

“Well, it's not like I have a sword or anything, anyway,” Sora backtracked a little, when he realized.

“You'll find that we never lack for weapons, on the Highwind.”

“Then maybe I'll try my hand at one someday!”

Unconsciously, Riku's gaze slipped to size up Sora's strength. “If you like,” he nodded, unaware that he was inspiring a touch of discomfort in Sora.

He'd been too forward with his suggestions, he thought.

“I mean, once I'm better,” Sora tried to address Riku's concern. “Maybe...”

Riku only realized he was staring, then. “Yes,” he broke his stare. “Wouldn't want to reopen any wounds.”

Sora relaxed slightly, unconscious of the faintest flush of pink at his cheeks.

“...You know, Riku, I think you're the best captain I've ever met.”

Those words pierced him right to the core and flooded Riku with an unfamiliar kind of warmth. Sora sounded...genuine, in that, and for all the time they'd spent together – regardless of the varying degrees of Sora's awareness – Riku had only entertained idle fantasies about having his respect.

Maybe Sora didn't really know him...but it felt that way. It felt like Sora knew the weak parts Riku had talked about, and told him he was the best, anyway.

“...Thank you, Sora.”

“Thank you for saving me.”

Riku's heart swelled.

“Any time.”

Secrets, or partial secrets, took great effort to keep aboard their ship. And a secret that left behind evidence, or rather, left less than there had been as evidence, had no hope of remaining undiscovered for long.
Being ratted out didn't do much to help, either.

Saix had gone to greater lengths than a mere discussion with Axel; when it came to the matter of Roxas, he wasn't willing to risk his plans any further. A suggestion to their Superior had him removed from Axel's custody, for the time being. Part of Axel's recompense was to be forced to work that much harder, and it wouldn't do to have distractions around.

Of course, the same went for just about everyone else... And as such, Zexion was the one saddled with Roxas.

Apart from Lexaeus, he was the only one to show no interest whatsoever, in their prisoner-turned-charge. The latter never lacked for duties, being the most physically powerful of them all, and wouldn't be able to keep much of an eye on Roxas.

Hence Zexion's irritation, as he led Roxas from Axel's quarters to the sick bay.

Despite his obvious displeasure, Roxas counted himself lucky not to be left in the 'care' of Saix, or Xigbar. Many of the crewmen he'd had run-ins with were just about as threatening, and he was just as glad not to be put with them, either. Zexion didn't look quite so dangerous, and he would – he supposed – try to avoid drawing his ire.

It seemed simple... As Axel had said (and Roxas had grudgingly remembered) there was a difference between cooperating and submitting. His hands were firmly in his pockets, relieved to have not been bound, as he thought he might be.

Maybe they just didn't think they needed to bother. That Roxas didn't pose any real threat.

“Zexion?”

They'd almost reached their destination, but had been followed half of the journey by Demyx. Another person Roxas wasn't put on edge by, primarily because he seemed to be 'the weak one' of the Never Was crew... Or, in more gracious times, he was occasionally lumped together with Axel in a category Roxas couldn't name.

“Are you busy?” Demyx inquired, turning to walk sideways in line with Zexion. He hadn't appeared to have even looked Roxas's way, and only did when Zexion indicated him silently as an answer.

Roxas met his gaze, but very quickly diverted it. He was a 'job'... That was a little bit insulting. But he grit his teeth, and didn't speak.

“Oh...” Demyx's shoulders slumped a little, but the disheartened expression was off of his face in the blink of an eye. “Could you, uh...”

Zexion glanced at him, and the hand he'd lifted up. There was a slash across his finger from a snapped sitar string; very shallow and by no means a danger to him, but...

Sighing quietly, Zexion faced forward and continued heading deeper into the hull. “Of course. Come along, then.”

It wouldn't do to leave it and have it get infected.

Demyx perked up, following with a genial smile and a bit of lovesickness in his eyes. Roxas withheld a groan. It was especially easy to see why it was they were able to trap people into thinking they weren't monsters.
There was no one else down in sick bay, which was a relief to Demyx. He thought Vexen may have been present, and was all the more pleased to be around Zexion without the hostile presence so often lurking over his shoulder.

“You may stand by the bed, there, and do not touch anything,” Zexion instructed, physically directing Demyx to have a seat. Nonetheless, he appeared confused.

“Him, or me?” Demyx looked Roxas's way, and was pushed down onto the chair.

“You stay where you are,” Zexion directed, avoiding sounding exasperated. Roxas took his place by the bed, as he was bid, but managed to get another eye-roll in without being called on it.

“Right,” Demyx nodded, keeping his bleeding finger aloft and watching Zexion with poorly-concealed admiration as he prepared disinfectant. He waited until he’d turned back his way and started gently dabbing at the tiny slash, forgetting about Roxas completely. “So...the Captain has you pretty busy...?”

“Not particularly,” Zexion was focused on his minor task, allowing Demyx to make conversation without strong feeling one way or another. “I often find research for myself, though.”

With the two of them not paying attention, Roxas glanced about for something to steal. Something small. Just out of spite.

“What kind of research?”

“Surely nothing you would be interested in.” Zexion began wrapping the finger. Roxas quietly reached for small metal tool he couldn't identify.

“I could be,” Demyx sounded earnest. “I'm interested in anything you do.”

Zexion was made vaguely uncertain, by that. “Are you really?” He prompted Demyx get back to his feet, and then crooked a finger to motion for Roxas.

The little hooked tool was immediately dropped, before he could pocket it. “I'm not hurt,” Roxas protested.

“I want to examine you.” Zexion left no room for argument.

“I could even help, if you wanted,” Demyx offered, still entirely wrapped up in what the two of them had been talking about and not caring even remotely about Roxas. “Even if it's something like... I don't know, grabbing books for you, or finding things...”

He raised an eyebrow. “Aren't you busy enough with the tides?”

“Oh, only when the Cap'n needs me. The rest of the time when we're sailing naturally, I'm free...”

To Demyx's immense hope, Zexion appeared to be considering it; someone to do the grunt work was hard to come by, when Lexaeus was unavailable or unwilling. For Roxas, the way they were talking was just another reminder of how unnatural they were, and he was all the more reluctant to let Zexion 'examine' him. He eyed the seat anxiously, and dallied too long.

“You may also lie down, if you're more comfortable that way,” Zexion sighed pointedly. Reluctantly spurred into action, Roxas took a seat.

Demyx sensed that his focus was elsewhere, for now, and kept quiet so as to not bombard him. He
didn't feel inclined to leave, hoping for a real answer to soften his eventual dismissal.

Zexion inspected Roxas, apparently one piece of him at a time. His eyes, ears; he grabbed something flat, and pressed Roxas's tongue down to peer down his throat. “Remove your shirt, please.”

Roxas swallowed, tongue now dry. “Excuse me?”

Demyx paused, having confused who Zexion was speaking to again and been just about to pull up the hem of his own.

“I need to examine your chest and abdomen,” Zexion explained, unblinking.

Roxas had an unpleasant image of Xigbar's leering face, and glanced compulsively towards Demyx, as though he could confirm that Zexion's intentions were nothing like any of those men.

Surprisingly, Demyx caught the look and reassured, “Zexion is professional.”

Under his breath, Roxas groaned and slid off the borrowed shirt, letting it drop. Zexion promptly began to examine his chest, practiced fingers avoiding distinct bruise marks with indifference-laced distaste...

But they stopped at one point, and went over Roxas's heart again.

Demyx had been scanning Roxas's chest very quickly and less innocently, but as usual, Zexion had more of his focus. “…What's wrong?”

“Interesting,” Zexion murmured, making a mental note before moving on with his examination.

Roxas tried not to squirm in discomfort, feeling the eyes on him as clearly as the hands.

“What is?” Demyx appeared to be oblivious, or uncaring, about the rudeness of discussing Roxas's state right in front of him. “Is he sick?”

Zexion just shook his head, and instructed, “Please turn around.”

Roxas shifted, having to straddle the chair to comply. He slumped against the wooden back of it, breathing out and trying to focus on something else, anything that was the discomfort of being here.

Taking a sharp implement from his arrangement of tools, Zexion jabbed at a pressure point with the blunt end.

It stung, shook his whole body, and Roxas gasped. He felt Zexion jerk back, or was it that? He couldn't see, but it seemed almost like he'd been shoved off by something -

“Hey!” Demyx's eyes widened, but Zexion smirked.

Roxas turned back around sharply, tense and staring. Something... Something had just happened, and he'd been the one to do it, but what-?

“Hey,” it was dawning on Demyx. “Hey, you're like -”

“Demyx,” Zexion cut him off, all business. “I need you to attack him.”

Roxas pitched himself off of the chair, staggering. “What-...”

Without so much as questioning, Demyx's sitar had formed from nothing, condensation from the air becoming solid in his arms. The notes started, injured finger not even impeded by the stiffness of
bandages, and water whipped towards Roxas fast.

It felt practically solid, when it clipped Roxas's shoulder. Equipment scattered as Roxas ducked and bolted, almost in shock. He'd thought Demyx was the one who deplored violence, and now -

No time to wonder at the sudden hostility. He had to get out of here.

Roxas threw himself at the door, managing to get it open and dash out before water could cut through his scarred back.

“Get him up on deck, the others need to see,” Zexion told Demyx, who was already halfway out the door after him.

Demyx had more experience running than he did chasing, manipulating water to strike out at Roxas. He'd turned, looking frantically for a door or somewhere to go, but everything looked to be clouded – there was only one direction to go in, in his mind, and he was certain it hadn't been that way before.

Zexion followed slower, focused on the illusion he'd created to direct Roxas, and Demyx lashed out with a slash of water across his face.

The pressure was powerful enough to cut. Roxas yelped, and tried to dive aside. There was nowhere to hide, either.

“Sorry,” Demyx winced, but the tempo picked up and the attacks started coming faster.

Roxas covered his head and sprung through the trappings of the hull, trying to run literally anywhere else. He didn't call for help – he didn't particularly want to, not knowing who would bother, not knowing what prompted this. What had he done?

Axel... If he was going to find anyone, it should be Axel...

Roxas ran mindlessly, the sound of splashing and music in pursuit. He wasn't even sure where he was, how he got there. The walls were unlike what he'd seen before, doors simply not there and apparently never having existed.

Thus, when one of the doors opened and Marluxia stepped out, it was like he'd come from nowhere. Water sloshed around his feet, and Roxas slipped, crashing into him and immediately veering in another direction when he shoved Marluxia away.

“What in the – Demyx,” Marluxia appeared shocked, too taken aback to even be properly indignant, but decided this was interesting enough to follow.

He wasn't alone. Other crew members left their cabins and posts – unaffected, in their eyes – their attention sufficiently diverted by what could have been the single most unusual event ever witnessed on board. Demyx, attacking apparently without orders, and Zexion assisting.

Roxas could hear them talking and calling to him, or to each other, but blood was pumping at his ears too hard to listen. He collided, shin-first, with a set of steps, and ignored the pain to clamber up to the deck.

They wouldn't leave him alone... He needed a weapon. Any weapon.

The air was sharp, on deck, the sun brilliant and blinding. He was drawing stares, but they were insignificant. None of them had sharp green eyes, none of them would get him out of this place and
He heard the water rushing up behind him, coming at him fast, and there was nothing he could do brace himself against it and let it push him back.

Xemnas stepped slowly forward, narrow eyes surveying the attack but making no move to interrupt. Saix had taken a cool amount of interest, intrigued to see Demyx being both proactive and violent.

“Demyx, use the sea,” Zexion instructed. Everyone had to be watching this.

Demyx complied, and the ship rocked jarringly as, with a roar, water began to rise over the sides. Roxas, soaked to the bone and cut, struggled to find breath in the few seconds he was given before he assault started.

“Stop this...!” Roxas choked.

“Just deflect it!” Demyx was growing frustrated, disliking having to attack at all. Roxas might have asked what he meant, or how he was supposed to manage, but his hearing was waterlogged and he could hardly open his mouth without breathing in water, coughing.

The assault had changed, with the tune. The seawater became a cyclone, whipping around Roxas with increasing speed. Unheard, Roxas almost screamed.

He had to break through... Demyx was going to drown him...

He was starting to panic.

Xigbar whistled, eyebrows flying up as he approached. “Whoa,” he looked up at the water trap. “Did the kid make a pass at your plaything?”

“Huh?!” Demyx sputtered, fingers flitting faster over strings. “No, no! I'm-... He asked me to -”

“Kill him.”

Zexion rarely ever raised his voice. When he did, he could only just be heard, over all the other noise.

Demyx missed a note, eyes growing wide.

But the cyclone whipped about faster. He couldn't say no, to Zexion, unless Xemnas ordered otherwise...and he did no such thing, observing.

Roxas's breaths were short, real terror taking over – he tried to reach through the water, recoiling when it slashed his skin and blood spilled freely down his arms. The cyclone was closing in on him, water pressure so vicious it could have taken off his fingers.

Still nothing, Zexion observed. If he turned out to be wrong in his hypothesis... Although, he was certain he was not... It would not be a loss, either way.

The sharp water was advancing and Roxas shouted, no real words and not to anyone in particular. He hadn't noticed his bleeding hands begin to glow.

“What are you waiting for?!” Demyx murmured under his breath urgently, prepared to bring the cyclone down on him.

“Finish it,” Zexion stepped towards him.
Demyx struck a hard chord to bring the full force of the cyclone down on him, and Roxas saw blinding light.

The burst blinded everyone on deck, and whitened out the midday sky. Zexion barely managed to shield his eyes, turning his face sharply and swinging a hand out to grab onto something as he was thrown back, water rushing past them fast. What he caught was the edge of the rail, holding on with as much strength as he had. Demyx hit the deck hard, forcing the water into streams as much as he could to spill back into the sea. Xigbar and Marluxia had both been sent sprawling right into each other, and although they'd managed to steel themselves, Xemnas and Saix skidded several feet.

Demyx began to sit up, wrought with relief, and tried to gaze ahead.

The light faded the same way fog would clear, but there was still an obvious source, a brilliant sun brought down to earth. Roxas could hardly breathe, every exhale a rasp of wet, hands clenched around something solid.

Xemnas was coming down to meet him, expression smooth, and Roxas lifted the strange blade before he even realized what he was holding was a weapon.

"Don't be foolish."

Roxas's arms shook, still bleeding, thoroughly shocked. His glow lessened, but he held his ground. The thing in his hand, like a sword, but... Like a physical manifestation of his defiance against imprisonment, it was shaped like a key.

Saix stepped forward, prepared to defend his Captain, but the observers looked upon a stalemate. Zexion flicked damp hair back into place, spitting out water as he picked himself up.

"Zexion..." Demyx brought himself back to his feet before going to help him up. He allowed it with a soft groan, visible eye on the exchange. Unexpectedly, Demyx's hand rubbed Zexion's back, and he murmured anxiously, "Are you okay?"

With the stare-down happening several feet away, Zexion hadn't expected to do anything but be at the ready. "I'm unhurt," he replied, very quiet and a tad startled.

"Good..." Demyx relaxed, brushing water from Zexion's hair, no less concerned.

"I did not expect the results to be so...explosive," Zexion murmured, gripping Demyx's arm to support himself. He nodded in reply, still stunned and coming down from the violence.

"Lower your blade," Xemnas commanded while drawing his own, "or I will let Saix do with you as he pleases."

"If I do, what then?" Roxas fired at him, eyes shifting from Xemnas to Saix. The glow around him flickered unsteadily, breathing painfully uneven.

"You answer our questions," Xemnas replied.

"I was hoping you would have some answers," Roxas snapped. He lowered the weapon, but not to his side.

Xemnas smiled. It was hollow, cold, and condemning. "It appears you are...like us."

It was only then that Roxas saw his own glow. His expression became one of horror, and Saix looked upon him more critically.
If Axel had somehow seen this, in him...

But, no. Saix truly doubted that.

“If you are caught using that weapon against any member of my crew, the consequences will be more severe than you can imagine,” Xemnas still had that smile, one that promised pain. “If you find yourself in the mood to be more...cooperative, we can re-evaluate your presence, on board.”

Xemnas turned his back on Roxas, confident in his own safety. Saix kept a close eye on them both, waiting for him to stand down.

Roxas held the blade tighter, but did not raise it again. Though it felt remarkably light in his hands, he was certain he didn't have the strength to lift it. The rest of the crew started to stray, now that the show was over, returning to their duties...but he was still getting glances, all of them differing in attitudes.

“Clean this up,” Xemnas passed Demyx on his way back to his cabin, intending on retiring for a time.

Demyx's head hanged, “Yes, Cap'n...”

Zexion could not look away from Roxas, watching the light sink into his skin. Zexion didn't pay any mind to Demyx as he slunk away, starting on the task issued to him, and basked in the pleasing knowledge that he'd been right.

Roxas's heartbeat didn't exist. If it had ever existed... It was gone, now.

The blade dissolved into light, and the only glow left was in Roxas's unfocused eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!
Chapter 10

In a pointed display that the casual observer may have thought was a grown man's equivalent to sulking, Axel had slipped away to doze in his cabin, eyes narrow and unfocused as he glowered at the ceiling. As a child might protest their favorite toy being taken, he'd decided to shirk the menial things he'd been told to do. Check and re-check the cannons, and the fuel. Travel up and down the hull to make sure that every lantern was still lit, and safely. They were minor things, a waste of time, and he wasn't needed (strictly speaking) for any of it.

Few as they were, there were still a lot of tasks on the sea that were...almost too simple, with what they could do. It was easy to succumb to monotony, to the repercussions of boredom...

He'd started to get used to having Roxas, as a deterrent. A distraction. Something to fill the empty time and...

Ugh. Axel considered sitting up, pursuing something productive. If not productive, occupying. He couldn't stand the quiet, the way he used to. Before they made port in Twilight Town, he'd been content to sit and wait at any given moment; sit in the quiet, wait for Saix. Sit in the quiet, meet with Marluxia. Sit in the quiet, and all the while, play with fire. Plot, entertain the fantasies of taking them both apart from the inside of their plans out, and watch flames curl around his fingers.

He thought he'd do the same, now, but being alone just gave him the opportunity to think of Roxas, some more. He'd even summoned his chakram, thinking he'd play around with them, but... There wasn't nearly enough room to do anything worthwhile, anyway.

Growling to himself, Axel lurched to sit upright. Sleep lacked appeal. He had to get out of his cabin, before he went too stir-crazy and reduced his bed to cinders.

He could go to Marluxia... He wouldn't be difficult to find. There was rarely a time he wasn't in his quarters, sadistically fulfilling his one duty to trump all others.

Axel opened the door to the sound of metal, scraping along the floor.

“...Roxas?”

The sound was something in his hand, dragging as he walked. He looked soaked to the bone. Roxas's head was bowed, in a fog, but his eyes raised when Axel spoke. There was vague surprise, through the daze; he'd started walking in the only direction he knew, to the only person he thought might be safe. Zexion had gone before Roxas's head could clear...not that he would've wanted his guidance, anyway.

Axel was the only person he had. He just...didn't expect him to be there.

His focus was on the strange blade, too dull to be a sword, unwieldy but natural. It was an extension of Roxas's arm, and unlike anything Axel had ever seen.

His arms...

Roxas's arms were bloody.

“...Where'd you get-?”

“Mm?” Roxas looked blank.
“That's...new,” Axel stepped out of the door frame, indicating the odd sword. He took a long look at his face, questioning, “Are you alright?”

“Oh,” Roxas looked down again. “Yeah. Just sort of...happened.”

The phrasing tugged at Axel's consciousness. “Happened how, exactly?”

“Just...had it,” he faltered.

“'C'mon,” Axel took another step towards him. The weapon would've given him pause, any other time, but Roxas wasn't going to attack him now... He could tell that much. He barely seemed able to stand. “Come with me. My quarters. Think you need to sit down...”

Roxas nodded, numb, and let Axel steer him. His hand was so warm, against his back...

Walking felt strange, but effortless. It felt as though someone else was moving his legs, doing the other half of the work. Axel directed him, had him sit on the hard mattress, and locked the door. Roxas heard the door close and bolt a fraction of a second after it had actually been done.

“What happened? Something must have.”

Axel couldn't take his eyes off the weapon. He hadn't seen anything like it; didn't even think it was a kind of blade that someone just made, much less left lying around.

“With Zexion,” Roxas struggled to remember; his lips were moving wrong, or independently, the sound of his own voice came from somewhere other than his throat. “He was doing an examination...then told Demyx to attack me.”

“What?” Axel's eyes widened. “...Did he?”

He'd clearly been wounded, but he didn't think Demyx would – but Roxas was nodding.

“...Holy shit.”

Demyx abhorred violence. Axel laughed about it, most of the time... They all did. Unless he was pushed, was fighting for his life, he didn't...

“Why the hell...?”

“Don't know,” Roxas shook his head. “He was going to kill me.”

“That doesn't make sense,” Axel leaned into the door. “Demyx doesn't like killing fish, he wouldn't try to kill a perso-...”

Wait.

The inklings, the inferences...

And Namine. The last time he'd had a chance to speak to Namine...

“What stopped him?” Axel moved away from the door, and asked like he didn't already know.

“I think I did,” Roxas brought the blade up into his lap, other hand gently resting over it. “I knew I was going to die, and then it just stopped. There was a lot of light, and then this...”

The bed sank a little. Axel sat beside him, absorbing the idea.
“...You're one of us.”

Roxas felt like he was coming back to himself, not remembering when and how he left. “That's...what Xemnas said,” he swallowed, and looked up at him. “Is it true?”

Axel looked over, towards his chakram. He was quiet for a moment, trying to put the words together delicately. “Those weren't made for me,” he finally said. “Didn't steal them, either. They just...were mine, and I got 'em the same time I accidentally burned down half a village. I'd never controlled fire, before.”

“...How long ago was that?”

“Don't remember, now. Time isn't easy for me to keep track of, out here,” Axel shrugged. “Point to the story is... You did the same thing, sounds like. You're not human, either.”

“But I am human,” Roxas snapped to his own defense. “I'm not like – I had parents, and I'm not hundreds of years old, or anything. I was born fifteen years ago, and I know it. And Sora's not --”

His voice froze in his throat. If Roxas had spent all this time not knowing... Could Sora have the same potential, and not know it?

“What do you think that has to do with it?” Axel snorted, but tried to subdue it quickly, out of some farce of consideration. “We weren't all born around the same time.”

“I just figured...” Roxas trailed off and turned away from him, a little. “Never mind.”

“We haven't been around since the dawn of time. Captain has, maybe, but we don't ask,” Axel sighed, putting his weight back against his hands. “Mortals don't do what you did. That means you're like us, and the sooner you come to terms with that...the easier it'll be to control it.”

“I don't even know what I did.”

“I didn't see, so I don't, either. All I know is, humans can't do what you said you did.”

Roxas gazed down at the blade.

He felt like...he'd lost.

“Fine,” he muttered. “I'm not human... Or, not completely.”

“...Sorry.”

Roxas just shrugged, and thought he should feel more about this than he did. Despair, or hopelessness... They were hidden somewhere in him, but he couldn't remember how to access those emotions.

In the quiet, Axel took the time to appraise the odd weapon again, and mused, “Looks more like a key, than a sword...”

“Huh?” Roxas's gaze re-focused. “Oh, yeah. It does, sort of.”

“Think it can unlock anything?”

“Who knows.”

Axel shifted his weight forward, running a hand through his mussed red hair. “This will complicate
“Things,” he noted. “Saix has been looking for a reason to kill you... This'll just make him more violent, I bet.”

“Actually...” Roxas hesitated. “Xemnas said, if I was cooperative...”

Saix wouldn't counter any orders given by Xemnas; not this far into the game. That Xemnas had said anything at all about Roxas's cooperation, though... Axel was surprised, but the rest of his alarm went up in smoke, and he grinned.

“So...not just me, to see the pirate potential in you.”

He'd said the wrong thing. Roxas stood sharply, grip tight on his blade. “I don't want to be like you.”

“You already are.”

“Maybe I am, but I won't use that to hurt people,” he snapped.

“So, don't hurt anyone,” Axel raised one eyebrow. “Just steal, instead. Defend yourself when you have to. We don't all partake in every aspect of a pirate's life.”

“The captain will make me...” Roxas started, but privately, he was reflecting on the idea of having back-up while he was looting. Just having Axel present, last time... It helped. He knew someone else would be the front line against anyone who spotted him and tried to put a stop to it...

“Not necessarily. He doesn't force Demyx.”

Roxas's cheeks went flush with irritation. “Demyx, if you somehow forgot, just tried to decapitate and drown me at the same time! I thought maybe there was one speck of goodness on this ship, and I was wrong!”

Axel could have laughed at the absurdity of Demyx being called 'good', but he somehow managed. “He wouldn't have, if he didn't know you could defend yourself... And if anyone but Zexion had told him to,” he amended.

“He didn't know – I didn't even know!” Roxas snarled. “Even if he did, so what? Will I be expected to kill if you tell me to?”

Axel's didn't bat an eye. “You don't believe you're in love with me, so I wouldn't expect you to.”

“Oh,” his lip curled. “Is that it.”

“Yes. As far as those two are concerned, at least. Not convinced Zexion didn't know what you were, if he told Demyx to...”

Roxas was simmering again, enveloped in his thoughts and still-vivid recollections of what just occurred. “...I may have done something else.”

“...What was it?”

“Well, he was examining me,” Roxas's eyes flickered away, “and I didn't want him touching me. So... I stopped him.”

“Stopped him how?”

“I just pushed him away.” Those weren't the right words. But... How else could he describe-?
“That's it?” Axel appeared somewhat disappointed.

“Not with my hands,” Roxas elaborated, though regardless of word choice, he felt he shouldn't have to. “Obviously.”

“Ah... So he was baiting you,” Axel nodded.

“That doesn't make it better,” he grit his teeth.

“But at least it makes sense, now.”

“What if it didn't work?” Roxas turned back towards him. “What if it wasn't enough? He was experimenting on me.”

“Demyx would have backed off,” Axel dismissed. “He loves Zexion, but he couldn't cope with having killed someone.”

Someone who hadn't tried to kill him first, he silently corrected.

“Why don't you ask him if he'd have backed off,” Roxas grumbled.

“Would that make you feel better?”

“Nothing is going to make this 'better'.

Just then, with a sound like soft bells, the sword in his hand burst into light and left nothing behind, startling Roxas so badly that he dropped onto the bed again, knees unwilling to support him. Annoyingly, Axel carried on as though nothing had happened.

“You're going to have to find a way to make it better,” he commented. “I can't help you with that.”

Roxas gripped the edge of the bed, scowl etching itself deeply onto his face, but Axel was delayed in realizing what had made his eyes go round.

“Oh -”

In the corner of the room, Axel's chakram vanished in smoke and reappeared in a fiery burst, in his hands. Roxas hadn't really noticed him do that, before; the shock sent him reeling back, staring.

“Should have mentioned,” Axel turned his weaponry over, in his hand.

“...I suppose if it came from nowhere, it'll go back to nowhere,” Roxas finally formed words.

“That's about right.” Axel's chakram vanished, again.

“Could've warned me.”

“Forgot you wouldn't know.”

It was all too... Bizarre. Inhuman. Roxas inhaled as deeply as he could, but it felt like his lungs wouldn't have any of it. “My head is spinning...”

“Just breathe,” Axel frowned, watching him sink until Roxas was leaning forward over his knees, shutting his eyes. Axel ran a hand over his back, trying to talk him through. “Breathe, Roxas...”

It was no good. Nothing was happening, with every attempt to take air in. Roxas wheezed
uncomfortably when he exhaled, starting to feel cold. Like he was submerged in water, unable to breach the surface – like Demyx was drowning him, again...

This was too much.

It was all too much.

He needed Sora, he needed to be somewhere else, he couldn't be this – whatever he was –

“Hey, look at me,” Axel urged.

He tried. He lifted his head, and the room tilted and swayed. Very briefly, in the same moment that something warm pressed against his lips, Roxas's vision blinked out and went black.

“Damn it, Roxas...”

The feeling he experienced in dreams, of being about to hit the ground after he fell. Roxas had pitched forward a bit, caught in Axel's arms, and he resulting head-rush shocked him into breathing again, this time too hard and fast.

“Slow it down,” Axel held onto him, and Roxas allowed it. He leaned into him, letting Axel's body keep his upright, and choked on every other breath as he tried to do as he instructed.

“Talk me, Roxy, say...anything. Just, slow down.”

He could still understand him. Still feel the warmth that came off him in waves, though right now it felt overbearing, like sitting too close to a bonfire. “S'all...black...”

“Shit,” Axel took in the look of him, all flushed but cold to the touch. “You need to lie down...”

“Alright...”

The bed felt softer than it was, when Axel coaxed him into lying back. Roxas was losing the strength to breathe so hard, weakness doing his work to even out his intake of air.

“You're clammy,” Axel observed. “Think you panicked yourself sick.”

Roxas didn't know if he liked the heat, or not. He felt like he was burning up, or freezing solid; he couldn't tell which. He tried to get closer, regardless.

“Don't get angry.”

Axel was starting to strip off his sodden clothing, and Roxas wasn't capable of being angry or indignant about it, anyway. Listless, it took all he had to avoid dropping his leaden limbs and making it harder for Axel. When he wasn't wearing a stitch, Axel lay down beside him, right flush to his body.

That feeling of being too near an open flame came back, but it was much nicer, now. The hand stroking his hair helped, too; Sora used to lull him to sleep that way, or vice versa, on the nights where things were particularly hard. His eyes opened, and raised slightly to glimpse Axel's face.

He looked, until he couldn't anymore, and the blush on his cheeks became a little brighter. He was literally, and dimly, aglow.

Axel almost stopped, almost kissed him, but did neither. He stared, murmuring, “Just sleep on this... It'll seem easier when you wake up.”
“...What if...someone comes looking for me...?” Roxas could barely make out the words and couldn't make them loud, but it didn't matter.

“They won’t.”

Axel didn't know if that was true, but he'd catch more hell for this than Roxas would. The reassurance calmed him a little, but it took Roxas some time to drift off.

Axel could tell when he had, as the glow faded away with his consciousness.

It had become very obvious that the shape on the horizon was not the ship Riku was looking for, when they got close enough to made out the blackened masts and flame-licked hull. The sails had been reduced to nothing and carried off by the wind, including the colors; it was impossible to identify the ship, by the time they reached it.

They pulled up alongside it, long enough to assess the situation, and knew that only one crew could have done this to a ship without smashing it to smithereens. It was still afloat despite its destruction, with not a single living man aboard.

The Never Was crew had been here, and they had robbed more than whatever riches they could carry off of it. It had been a long time since even the navy had glimpsed what they could do to another ship, and the collective confidence of the Highwind's crew was dashed. There was agitation, fear, and the certainty that their deaths would be in vain when – if – they finally caught up.

Riku saw only one course of action. They kept sailing, relieved to have evidence that they were on the right track, and every able-bodied soldier was up on deck with a sword in hand, wooden figures arranged in rows. Each man took his turn practicing sword forms and techniques, running drills expertly, and Riku wandered up and down to observe and correct them.

Not ignorant of the weight and reasoning behind the rekindled vigilance, Sora still felt a sense of longing, as he watched. He was well enough to come up on deck, now – the air would do him good, said both surgeon and Captain – though he wasn't exactly welcomed by anyone but Riku.

“Watch me,” Riku was taking the practice sword from one of the men he'd corrected several times, still the picture of patience. “Try to copy what I do...”

“Yes, Captain,” the soldier stood back, irritation bubbling under the surface of his composure. He was at least twice Riku's age, by the looks of him. Still, Sora could see that Riku wasn't wrong to correct him; the difference between the soldier's rigid, formulaic movements and Riku's...

Sora bit his lip. He used to practice similar moves alone, or with his friends, or Roxas. Back on the island, when they all used to talk about going out to exciting foreign lands and having adventures...

Riku flowed from one motion to the other, quick and precise, and he made it look effortless. He didn't slow, or try to dumb down the moves so the man could follow; there was an expectation among them, to be able to keep up lest it cost someone their life.

He hadn't seen Riku yell once, though. He wasn't dismissive and he didn't give leeway for 'almost',
knowing that an approach like that would only prove destructive in a real fight.

Sora rather admired him, as a teacher.

“Now try it again,” Riku was handing the sword back, exhale even. “Closer. Keep at it...”

The soldier tried, and he followed instruction fairly well. Still, Sora could see in his footwork that he was unbalanced, trying so hard to be quick like Riku that he wasn't as decisive or strong in his strikes as he was before.

He couldn't correct these men, though.

“Keep your footing,” Riku instructed, but moved on from the man for the moment. He'd come back to him, if he still wasn't up to par, but he had concern that he'd grow...less-patient, if he continued.

He just needed to separate himself, just for a moment, and he wanted to be separate with Sora. Riku inclined his head, coming up beside him and asking, “How are you?”

“Better!” Sora immediately piped up, leaping at possible opportunity. “Much better.”

“Glad to hear it.” Riku didn't miss the hope, in his voice.

“I'm glad I came on deck. It's nice to be able to watch,” Sora grinned.

“Even if they are a bit hopeless,” Riku leaned into the railing, and spoke in an undertone, only for Sora's ears. Maybe he was more frustrated than he'd been letting on.

“They're not hopeless, they're just missing all the important stuff.”

“Now, I didn't say completely hopeless,” Riku grinned faintly. “You're not wrong, though. They've allowed themselves to get overconfident. Slack. And they don't seem to really want to listen to me when I remind them that I know better.”

“Some of them have it really well. These are your...military, right?”

“Not exactly the 'best of the best', are they?” Riku gazed back over at the man he'd been correcting, and noted (with a twinge of exasperation) that he had reverted back to the form he'd started with.

Fantastic. If the pirates challenged him to swordplay and kept to the rules of formal engagement, that crewman would be just fine.

Sora almost cringed. “All I was gonna say is that the ones who are war-minded aren't really suited for this type of sword play. They're used to just stabbing and slashing.”

“The trouble being, that won't cut it, out here...” Riku glanced at Sora, considering. “Care to help me prove a point?”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

“How well is your back? Your health?”

“Much better,” Sora repeated, tentatively growing earnest again. There was nervousness, knowing that whatever they were going to do wouldn't inspire the crew to like him any more, but he trusted Riku.

That was what Riku had hoped to hear. “Follow my lead,” he began to stride back towards his crew,
raising his voice to be heard over their exertions. “Everyone, halt.”

The men fell into straight-backed stances, watching their Captain.

“I can't help but notice that the moment I stop watching my military trained crew, you fall back into bad habits with your swordplay,” Riku announced, being sure not to look at any man in particular. “So, I'm going to have Sora help show you how it's meant to be done.”

“Wha-...me!?” Sora hadn't meant to be so loud.

“Don't worry – I don't expect you to know exactly what you're doing,” Riku told him, still loud enough to be heard. “But if you can copy what I do better than these men can, I'll have made my point.”

There were so many eyes on them, doubtful and derisive, and Riku took the practice sword from the crewman he'd been trying to teach. He passed it to Sora, indicating for the soldier to step aside.

“Start off on your own,” Riku gave him an encouraging nod, and Sora took hold of the hilt. It was heavier than the practice swords he was used to but he smiled, getting a feel for it.

“See if you can copy the motions they were doing. Then I'll correct your form, and we'll see if you can do better than these men,” Riku said, and then lowered his voice. “Which I'll bet you can.”

The crewman looked openly resentful, obviously hoping Sora would fail spectacularly, but he hardly noticed. Sora weighed the sword in his left hand, then chose his right, looking at the dummy. He'd memorized the steps, while watching, and his feet seemed to know them even better than he did.

Step, step, step – swish, thrust, parry, stab. It was formulaic and soothing but Sora didn't settle for formula. He copied Riku, from before, moving constantly and pushing his shoulder into strikes to drive more force into the offensive strikes.

He wasn't sure where he was supposed to stop. He couldn't resist adding a little more to the set.

Sora finished the routine the others had been performing and threw in one last, flashy move, turning on his heel and delivering a ‘killing blow’ between the dummy's ribs – or, where they would be.

Riku hadn't been aware he was holding his breath.

He gathered from the way Sora talked that he wasn't ignorant, could hold his own... But he hadn't expected him to be as good as he was.

“Impressive,” he breathed softly, heart skipping a bit faster.

The soldier glowered.

“...Well?” Riku turned to the crew. “If he can do that without military training, none of you have any excuse. Carry on – correctly, this time!”

Catching his breath easily, Sora blushed and returned the soldier's sword, getting out of the way. He was honestly less happy than ever to be apart from the action, now that he'd had a taste of a blade in-hand again, but he followed Riku off to the side.

He was still reeling with admiration for the boy, honestly impressed. Riku wrangled the swell of emotion back under control, not sure why his surprise was affecting him so strongly.

“So where did you learn that?”
“Hm?” Sora gazed up at him and laughed, almost like he was sheepish. “Oh, well, I had lots of good teachers along the way.”

“That was impressive,” Riku insisted. “Not exactly my style, but...”

“I move around too much when I could be landing blows,” Sora admitted. “That's what Roxas always...”

He trailed off, and Riku felt a prickle of hot guilt for leading him to talk about this. He could think of only one thing to distract him, again, and truth be told he knew it was entirely selfish.

“If you're up for it...” he broached carefully, “we have wooden swords, for sparring.”

Sora's eyes lit up, willingly taken off his train of thought. “Is that allowed? Will I be punished if I beat the captain?”

“No,” Riku smirked. “Because you won't beat me.”

“You look like you're pretty good,” Sora grinned, and followed Riku towards the supply of practice blades that was still on-deck. He caught one with both hands, when it was tossed to him.

“You aren't too sore, though? You're sure?” Riku checked again.

“I can't move quite as much as I normally do, anymore... But that just means when I get back to normal, I'll be even better.”

“Still...maybe I should have a handicap,” Riku mused.

Sora laughed, the nearby crew forgotten. “I could tie your ankles together.”

“Or,” Riku smirked, setting the wooden sword down. He shrugged off his jacket and took off his hat, but withdrew something from a pocket – a long, dark strip of cloth.

It wasn't much of a handicap, in truth. Riku tied the blindfold over his eyes, accustomed to doing this nearly every time he trained on his own, or back home...

But Sora didn't need to know that.

“Wh-” he began to protest. “No way!”

“Come on, Sora,” Riku picked up the sword again, eyes closed behind the black strip of cloth. It was too opaque to make out anything beyond it, but he'd found that keeping his eyes open as well unconsciously made him strain to try to see through. “You're not worried, are you?”

“I...” Sora balked. He was honestly a bit nervous, now, when Riku was so confident in this. “Of course not. It's your funeral.”

He dropped into a low battle stance, both hands on the sword, and watched Riku with wonder as he drew himself up into a stance of his own.

Riku honestly wasn't sure how their spar would go. He hadn't faced someone with Sora's style, before...

But adaptability in battle was key. His father had taught him that. One could not hold the power if he couldn't figure out how to keep it.
“On what count?” Sora asked, searching for some sign that Riku could actually see through that.

“Three,” Riku began, and subtly shifted into a more defensive posture. He wouldn't take the first move... He wanted to find out how Sora would start. “Two...”

Neither of them had noticed that the crewman not running drills had all slowed, watching.

“One.”

Sora took the first opening he could. He darted forward, on the offense and zig-zagging in the hopes of confusing him.

The sound of his steps were obvious. Among the waves, wind, clattering and clanging, Riku still knew every sound of his ship better than any other terrain. Riku pivoted, and clashed his wooden sword against Sora's.

Sora pushed heavily against Riku's defense, taking the split-second to absorb that Riku could do that, then twisted around Riku's side to try to get behind. He didn't manage, because Riku just wasn't there anymore.

It was flashy, Riku would admit, but also the most effective way he knew how to get away. He flipped, feet over hands, to the side and landed on both feet, striking out towards Sora – he was almost caught off guard while reflecting that he'd never seen someone do that in a sparring match, before. Sora crouched low to block the downward strike and shoved back hard.

Riku didn't stumble. At the first sign of losing balance he back-flipped, this time, recovering easily but not in time to turn on the offensive. His wooden sword caught against Sora's, and he wondered how in the hell he was so fast when he was still injured.

Sora pushed, forcing Riku's blade to follow his in a curve and using the momentum to push himself up. It gave him an opening, lancing the point of the blade under his forced arm. Sora's heart leapt.

Riku kept his grip on the sword and leapt straight back before Sora's could actually come into contact with him, locking his blade with the other in one swift downward arc.

Inhaling sharply, Sora had to jolt backwards to avoid getting his own attack turned on him, and in the process pulled one of his shoulders back too far. The pain stung, and Riku froze in a defensive posture.

“Sora -” he inhaled sharply. “Alright?”

Privately, Sora took the moment in which he was testing his shoulder to marvel at how well Riku could fight blindfolded... And, more importantly, how he'd known exactly when Sora had hurt himself. How could anyone do that?

“Yes,” he re-adjusted his hold on the sword. They'd drawn the attention of the soldiers, too, but Sora didn't notice. “Now I am.”

“...Good,” Riku had caught his breath, and was listening sharply for any indication that Sora was still in pain. “We can stop, if you want to...”

“I'll stop when I beat you,” Sora exhaled and grinned.

“So, never,” Riku surmised, and waited to let Sora take the offensive again. When he moved, it was a little slower out of caution, faking around Riku's left and swinging for his side.
He didn't hear him quite properly, and didn't catch the blade in time. Riku was quick to retaliate, sword catching Sora's leg as he aimed low to try to get around him and knock him forward. It only made Sora stumble, the blow too careless, and he held the sword in front of his chest defensively, long enough to catch himself.

Riku grinned.

Diving around Sora, Riku backed off him again just to lurch forward with a steady barrage of strikes – Sora was almost disoriented by his speed, falling into a more traditional back-and-forth type of sparring one he got the hang of blocking Riku's strikes. He took every opportunity to go on the offensive, and was pushed back into defending just as often; they were fairly balanced in this, though Riku was quickly realizing that he would lose, this way.

It was harder to keep up without his vision, when Sora wasn't moving around as much. Steadily, he was being turned to defense as they went on, and that made him irritated with himself. Aggressively, his footwork began to force Sora to walk backwards as he went forward, and Sora found that every attempt to get his own feet forward was thwarted.

Sora's back met the edge of the ship, and for a second, fear blinded him. Riku faltered, mentally mapping the ship.

Trying to step back, Sora's foot met a vertical surface and the worry vanished. He had an idea. He took a chance in locking and wrangling their blades together off to one side, turning slightly and pushing off the rail to collide with Riku, shoulder impacting against his chest. Riku fell back, both of their swords knocked away in the process -

But he took Sora with him, and he barely had time to throw his hands out for balance. He was on top of Riku for a second until Riku abused the weight advantage he had, throwing Sora over and pinning him down with a forearm under his chin.

Pain flared up Sora's back, and he lost his bearings, crying out shortly.

Riku was upright and off of him, in a flash. “I'm sorry-...” he ripped off the blindfold, extending a hand to help him. “We're done, for now – are you alright? I wasn't thinking...”

Pain had knocked the wind out of him. Sora took his hand and got up in stages, wincing a little. It wasn't as bad, after that second-long agonizing spark... He supposed his back wasn't quite as healed as he'd hoped.

It was fading already, though. He didn't feel damaged. “Yes... I'm alright...”

“Go back to your duties,” Riku commanded his crew with a sharp look. “You aren't here to gawk.”

He hadn't let go of Sora's hand, but no one seemed to notice.

“That was a great match, Riku,” Sora grinned sportingly, trying to reassure him that the injury had subsided.

“It was... I'd hate to fight you if you get any faster,” Riku inhaled deeply, and Sora almost glowed.

“Thanks! But where did you learn to fight blindfolded?”

“Training exercise my father used to have me do,” Riku finally withdrew his hand to fold the blindfold, stowing it back in his pocket. “I've been training with it since I was young...”
“That's incredible!” Sora was kind of tempted to ask to try it, but thought better of it; he'd probably hurt someone. “It must be useful. I'm only half as good if I have to fight in the dark.”

Unknowingly, Riku's smirk turned bitter, but Sora didn't pick up on it regardless. “That's what I'm used to.”

Sora stared at him, smiling, until it dawned on him that he'd been doing so for an awkwardly long time. He cleared his throat, “I should probably go back down. I've been enough of a distraction already.”

“It's fine,” Riku shook his head, running a hand through his hair to smooth it before putting his hat back on. “Do go get your back checked again, though, just in case.”

Eyes following the movement of his hand, Sora almost missed what Riku said. “I will,” he smiled. “Thanks, again. It's really great to get moving again and back into practice.”

“Maybe we can spar again later,” Riku offered. “When my crew isn't watching us, hoping we'll both fumble...”

“I'd love to, Riku,” Sora replied genuinely, and then laughed. “Captain Riku.”

“Alright, get going,” he nodded slightly, and wondered what it was that made him smile back. Riku had never found someone's grin to be so infectious. “Time to check on the men, again...”

Sora was still smiling when he turned away and descended back below deck... And, strangest of all, so was Riku.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Massive thank you to everyone who took the time to write responses. We plan in advance, but we don't have chapters in reserve, we really do write them entirely in the time between updates, and motivation is so necessary to that. It feels awesome to write knowing people are really out there reading and reacting, and we try to plan for something of interest to happen with every update. Keep up the good work!

EDIT: The rest of Chapter 11 has been added! So sorry for the long wait... we said we wouldn't go on hiatus and then we sort of did anyway. Whoops. Hopefully there's enough going on in this chapter to make it worth the wait.

There was a small fishing town coming up, Riku found. Due east, and not nearly close enough for his liking. If they made a stop there to investigate whether or not anything had been seen or heard, or (in the scenario which was both the best and worst Riku could hope for) check if the pirates had made port... It could set them back even farther out of reach.

Riku was playing the odds. A place so small and off the beaten path would be a prime place to strike, for a pirate, but it could still turn out to be a massive waste of time.

If nothing else... They could top up their stores. Fresher food would be good for morale, and they would still be closer to catching The Ship That Never Was than ever in history.

How pathetic was that.

No one was going to argue the stop, anyway, when the majority of the crew seemed to hope that their Captain would be taking the opportunity to leave their unanticipated passenger on land. His quartermaster had already addressed him, privately, carefully pointing out that they didn't need to keep Sora with them to still count him as a lead. Riku had diplomatically told him that he'd consider their options.

With their heading given to the helm, Riku went below deck to make usual check-in rounds, with perhaps one particular destination in mind.

“Riku!” Sora was still, unfortunately, bound to sick bay most of the time, but less out of necessity. There was no individual cabin to keep him in, and Riku had yet to assign him to any one place. Besides that, there were still the occasional dizzy spells and back twinges to watch for, and Riku encouraged rest.

But they both knew Sora was beyond the need for such caution, and it was starting to drive him to serious cabin fever.

“Sora,” Riku returned the greeting, and the geniality. “Are you needed here?”

“I'm needed... Wherever you need me, Captain,” Sora grinned brightly, enthused by the prospect of getting out of sick bay.
“Care to join me, then? I'm going to look over some charts, see if I can predict where else those pirates could be headed...”

Had to prepare to be wrong, after all.

“Yes!” Sora hopped down from the cot and hurried to join him, needing to take broad steps to keep up with longer legs. “Do you have any ideas about our, um, heading?”

He was picking up on the terms. Riku's lips fought him, not wanting to smile so much where he might be seen by his crew. “We're going to be docking very briefly, checking for rumor. We'll see.”

Sora was actually overtaking him by a few steps, eager. Riku let the smile win, watching him come up to the cabin doors while he continued to fill him in on where they were going. He only fell back in step with Sora when they reached the cabin door, so that Riku could open it.

His map was still sprawled open and pinned flat, on his table. Riku began removing his coat, first, while Sora leaned over the map to start visually dissecting it...with, admittedly, not much of a clue as to how to do that.

“Are there any other clues where they're going?” Sora inquired. “What are these pins...?”

Riku slung his jacket over his bedpost, and approached the map. “They mark the locations that we've confirmed they've ransacked, or destroyed. I've been trying to guess at a pattern.”

“I wish I'd heard more on board,” Sora bit his lip. “Especially about that girl...”

“It's alright, your priorities were exactly what they should have been.” Leaning over the table, Riku took one of the many blue pins clustered and used it to mark where they were docking.

“Will we lose the trail if we take too much time at port?” Sora sounded anxious.

“We won't be there long,” Riku reassured him, and – a little – himself, too. “Just long enough to check local rumor and buy what we need. Won't even be a day.”

Sora nodded, but his mind had strayed. Whenever he thought of Roxas, he seemed a mite paler, like he would be physically sick with worry. Concerned, Riku ran one hand over Sora's arm, trying to distract him, and was rewarded by Sora's usual sunny smile when he remembered himself.

“We'll find them,” Riku murmured.

“I know,” Sora nodded slowly. “Me and Roxas can't ever stay apart for long.”

“And we've nearly caught up to them before, with ships not as fast as The Highwind,” Riku informed him. The trail had always been lost very early, so with how they'd been dogging them...It was only a matter of time.

“Just...” Sora balked. “Be careful. They're so... It's like they're not even human.”

Riku nodded solemnly, staring down at the chart. “...There are stories, about the things they do, what they might be. But ultimately, they're just flesh and blood, and we can defeat that.”

Swallowing heavily, Sora hesitated over his words. “What do you know about them individually?”

“... Not a lot,” Riku reluctantly admitted.

“What about the one with the red hair and the... I don't know what they're called... Spinning blades?
I'm not sure what his position on the ship is, but do you know anything about him?"

He shook his head. “All I know for certain is that there are twelve crew members. No one knows much of anything about them as individuals.”

Sora tried to hide his disappointment.

“You're probably the only person in the world, except for perhaps your brother and Namine, who know things about them,” Riku impressed.

“I can tell you more I know, but it's not a lot.” Sora leaned heavily into the table. “Wish I could talk to Roxy...”

“You will. Soon.” Riku regretted making that sound so much like a promise, when he knew he shouldn't... “What can you tell me?”

“Well,” Sora thought aloud, “they only have one girl on board that I saw, but she's one of the scariest. I only saw all of them once... Some of them are huge, and at least one is only as big as me... And then... A couple are more brutal than others...”

Sora shivered. Riku abandoned the chart for a moment to pull Sora close to him.

He hadn't thought it through, interrupting Sora. He was strongly urged to hug Riku in response, but kept his hands gripping at his own arms. They weren't quite holding each other, just being close.

“...If it's too much to talk about...”

Sora shook his head, and found his footing in his recollection. “There is one... I guess he must be right-hand to the captain. He does most of the dirty work for him – he'll do anything the captain says, but it's more than that. It's like he'll do anything for a chance to hurt people – innocent people – or... Kill them, even...”

Riku was trying to detach from the implicit little thoughts worming their way into his skull; that Sora only knew these things because he'd lived it. He mentally listed the new information, comparing it to the nothing he knew before.

“I got off easy,” one of Sora's hands reached gently over his shoulder to graze his scars. “I don't think the one who did mine even wanted to, really. I tried to save Roxas, but I just made it worse... That's when he stepped in.”

Suddenly, Sora buried his face into Riku's chest, still holding himself and shuddering. Riku's arms wrapped around him tightly, like a reflex.

“He was screaming so much, Riku,” Sora's voice was muffled, but unmistakably haunted. “Even when they pushed me overboard, I could hear it...”

Riku was silent, at a loss. Slowly, Sora's arms were unwinding from himself to clutch at Riku instead, hands practically tearing into his shirt with his grip.

“...We'll get to him,” Riku finally managed. “We'll find out where they've been last, get news... Find them.”

He felt Sora nod, and started to gently rub his back in the hopes that it would calm him. Sora had needed to hear him say they'd rescue him, no matter how possible it was, and tried to tell himself that Roxas was okay in the meantime. He was always the strong-willed one, Sora reminded himself.
And, even though there couldn't be a way for it to be true, Sora thought that there was no way something more terrible could have happened to Roxas without him...feeling it, somehow.

Sora pulled away, first. Riku wanted to say something, but forgot what it was before the words were even formed.

“Thank you,” Sora was quiet. “I'm okay now.”

“We will get your brother.” Riku sounded very certain.

“I know. If anyone can do it, you can, Riku.”

There was that faith in him, again. It was hard to know how to respond to it, apart from simply thanking Sora, but it felt somehow inappropriate in that moment.

Besides... He wasn't positive that Sora's confidence in him was justified. His mind wandered to the Never Was captain's sadistic right-hand, and wondered what it might take to best him. It was probably nonsensical to even worry about; a pleasure for inflicting pain did not make a foe harder to defeat.

It just meant that losing was a more fearful prospect... And it wasn't himself that Riku was more concerned for.

Sora's fingers briefly trailed around one red pin in the map, tracing the harbor he and Roxas were stolen from.

“Thinking of something?” Riku followed the motion.

“Not really... Nothing important.”

“At this point, I don't know for sure what is and isn't important to know.”

Sora considered that. “As far as I know, the current that was taking me away from the ship was moving west... But you probably knew that already.”

“We've encountered problems with the currents, in the past,” Riku began tracing the natural currents on the map, that were penned right into the paper for their strength. “There honestly shouldn't be so many routes they can take and maintain speed, but they manage, no matter where the flows or which direction the wind comes from.”

“How can any ship move like that?” Sora's brow furrowed, expecting that Riku might have some nautical knowledge he didn't.

“We have no idea,” he confessed.

“It really is like they're not human,” Sora murmured in an undertone, but shrugged it off and pointed. “Well, if they did keep heading east, they might end up hitting this coast. They might dock or change course, but they still would've had to pass through this cluster of islands... This is where we're going?”

“They attacked again here,” Riku pointed out another red pin. “That burned-out ship. It was probably adrift for a while, put us on a more south-eastern track, but... Yes. We're assuming they either sailed right through these islands, or made port at this particular one.” He indicated the largest of them.
“If they have any limits, the rocky water will slow them too,” Sora observed, still running his finger along the path, past the little islands. “Or they'll have to change direction, and we could catch up to them then.”

“Right,” Riku was pleased; having Sora talk it out made it feel less as though he was grasping at straws. “There’s only so much I’m willing to accept they can do. We’ll have them cornered.”

Abruptly, Sora tackled him in a hug, hope renewed. “Thank you!”

Riku regained his balance after he got past his surprise; he was having trouble getting used to so much well-intentioned touching. “...We should both rest, the crew will alert me when we dock.”

“I do nothing but rest,” Sora objected, but backtracked quickly. “You don’t sleep much, do you? They make you work too hard.”

“No harder than I should.”

“They're trying to make you prove you can.”

He could be unexpectedly observant, Riku noted. “Maybe,” he smirked, “But I am proving it.”

“You don't have to tell me that,” Sora grinned.

“You're probably the only one of this ship smart enough to know I'm capable, already.”

At that, Sora almost glowed, laughing. “No one's ever said anything like that to me before.”

“That's only because you're smarter than you look.”

It took him a second to work out Riku's jibe. “Hey...”

Snickering, Riku ruffled Sora's hair and pulled away from him to start removing the heavier articles of clothing he wore. His belt and boots were put aside, with his jacket joining them properly. In spite of his objection, Sora sat down on the bed to take off his own borrowed boots, not often one to turn down a comfortable nap.

Riku privately deliberated before removing his shirt.

With a quick double-take in his direction, Sora tried to find somewhere to look that wasn't at Riku, and tried to wrangle the blush down. He could still glimpse Riku out of his peripheral vision, stretching his arms above his head and making the muscles of his back and shoulders flex.

“Something wrong?” Riku sounded like he was teasing him, again, approaching the bed.

“Nothing.” If Sora hadn't almost squeaked, that probably would have convinced him. He could have laughed or pressed it, but he got comfortable on his bed and closed his eyes.

Carefully, Sora's gaze slid back towards him, but seeing Riku with his eyes closed mercifully distracted him, and stirred his nearly-forgotten curiosity.

“... Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” Riku didn't open his eyes, though he was still far from rest.

“It's not just me you spar with the blindfold, is it?” Sora shifted, bringing his legs up on the mattress. “Why choose to fight in the dark?”
“It's how I like to train. My father-...” Riku paused, then changed the direction of his sentence. “I was always concerned about the disadvantage you have, in the dark. He trained me in total darkness... Taught me how to compensate.”

“I understand that, but... Why, when you don't have to? It just seems... I don't know. Sad.”

“To keep me sharp, I suppose.” Sad? He thought it was sad?

Sora felt absently over the bedcovers. “I think you can find light anywhere... If you look for it.”

Riku's eyes opened. “Even battling in the dead of night?”

“There are stars, aren't there?” Sora countered, and smiled.

“... I think it'll be easier to find light with you around to show me how it's done.”

Not that it had ever been under consideration, but... There was no way he'd just leave Sora anywhere.

“I'd love to,” Sora settled down next to him, and fell into a light sleep much faster than Riku did.

As one descended into the depths of the Never Was hull, the lanterns stopped being lit by oil. Fuel had them burn longer, up on deck, but down here there was no need to account for the inherent dangers a sharp jolt might cause. Nothing could catch fire, below deck, because every flame was under Axel's control.

It was such a goddamn chore.

They burned bright and hot for too-short of a time, and before he could rest, he had to do one more check of every single one. In their glass prisons, sparks fizzled out into nothingness, only to be reignited as he passed and slanted an irritable gaze at the invisible ember.

If he weren't in so hostile a mood, the new flames wouldn't have flared up blue, to start with.

It had been days since he'd had Roxas at his side, much less in his bed. He'd hardly even glimpsed him, since Xemnas had set up a training regime for him.

Everyone had a chance to knock him around in hopes it would trigger another light show. Axel's number, somehow, had been skipped.

Now that they were all aware that Roxas had power, he was interesting. Even the crew members who had shown no previous interest were sniffing around, trying to get a sense for what he could do. What his value was.

And it wasn't that Axel was jealous, but he found reasons to be irked over the fact that some of the crew members thought Roxas's greatest worth was the view from behind.

The hollow feeling he was accustomed to was accompanied by a familiar and destructive flare in his chest. If he lacked for common sense, Axel would have scorched the ship a little. Just to relieve some of that pressure.
If it built much more without *some* form of release, it could happen anyway...

Taking down a stubborn lantern – it must have burned out long ago with not even a suggestion of heat left in it – Axel flicked a budding flame in through the top and replaced it on its bracket, the slight clink of the hook alerting him to other sounds.

Footsteps.

The direction they were coming from was unclear, but Axel didn't so much as falter, having nothing to fear from any shadow. The shape in the dark was coming towards him from the hall yet to be lit; a corridor impossibly long, for a vessel, and not the right direction, considering...

But Saix had to have been in the Captain's quarters, and that could never quite be pinned down to one location.

“Hello, Axel.”

He stopped, cocking his head at the approaching figure. Saix's eyes were the first thing visible, luminous in any light. “If I had a heart, it might've just stopped.”

Saix ignored his opening for banter. He typically did. “You've been more elusive than usual, lately.”

“Maybe you just haven't been looking hard enough,” he countered, putting another lantern back on its hook.

“There is more we have to discuss.”

“Here?” Axel glanced behind himself compulsively.

“There isn't anyone around to hear.”

In general, Saix's eyes and ears were more trustworthy than Axel's. Accepting that as truth, Axel took measured steps towards him. “Alright,” he nodded. “Let's talk.”

Saix didn't move towards him, or away. “I have been in counsel with the Captain...”

That was practically redundant.

“That so?” Axel was within his reach, if Saix so desired.

Saix hardly blinked, even with Axel close enough to feel the warmth radiating off his body. Instead, he lowered his voice.

“His goals align with ours, Axel,” he informed him quietly. “His plans are the same.”

Axel stopped barely a step away. “...I somehow doubt that.”

“But that is the truth. What's more – he knows things we do not.”

“And with his vast knowledge, he's kept us adrift for decades,” Axel arched an eyebrow. “So you find it all out and we put it to better use.”

“There is no better use.” Saix was grave. “The mutiny is off, Axel.”

His expression was stone, glowing eyes bright like fire. The way Saix was looking at him... His mind had been completely changed.
That wouldn't do. There was only one obvious reason that could be, and it left Axel feeling...

Entertained.

“He must be fantastic in bed,” he leaned into Saix, lips canting to a smirk.

Saix's eyes narrowed, his tone shifting to something to be something a little more like pride. As if pride was something they could feel. “We will become whole. Soon. But only Xemnas is fit to lead us there.”

“So you want to fall in line, instead?” Axel's hands slid up Saix's steel-still shoulders. “Sit and wait?”

“I will remain close to Xemnas as First Mate, and if you hope for any more information to be passed down to you, you'll do as you're told.”

The fire in Axel's chest burned hotter, but practice kept his tone even. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

“If you keep favor with Xemnas, you may even hold rank on this ship one day,” Saix replied, just as level.

“I didn't need favor with Xemnas. That was one of the beautiful parts of the old plan. I just needed favor with you.” Axel's body temperature was flaring up. At this proximity, Saix could feel it licking through his clothes.

“You may yet keep that.”

Being lovers... even being friends, that had ended so long ago. Decades, maybe, though out here it was hard to track. But something in the way the words left Saix's mouth made it clear... the person standing before him had never been his Saix at all.

“Not sure it matters if you're giving up on having any real power, here,” Axel's eyes narrowed. “You said Xemnas knows things? What things?”

“Nothing I'm in a position to share with you,” Saix's gaze didn't stray from Axel's, even as the glowing green became only slits.

Even as Axel leaned forward and pressed his lips to his, and then he was too close to maintain the imposing eye contact.

“That wasn't a problem when you weren't loyal to him,” Axel muttered, lips brushing against his with each syllable, but not quite kissing him.

“If a mutiny had gone on, there are secrets Xemnas would have kept through torture and death,” Saix rumbled, making his words felt as much as they were heard.

“But he still told you?”

“Not all, no.”

His loyalty had been seduced away. Axel wasn't so naive as to think he could entice it back, but he'd be damned if he didn't fight.

Axel's heat became blazing and the pressure against his lips abruptly changed, hands becoming fists around Saix's shirt. The response was immediate; Saix growled and gripped his arms, nails like claws, and pulled Axel to slam him to the wall as though he weighed nothing.
The ache up his back made him shudder, and the wall gave him leverage to hoist his legs up to flank his sides. Saix pressed him hard against the surface, hard body in contact with every part of Axel.

Sharp canines sliced Axel's lip, and hot hands became searing in retaliation.

The burn was familiar enough to be welcome, but Saix snarled and dug his claws through his shirt to leave bloody lines down his arms. The force parted their lips, barely, enough for Axel to gasp and growl back at him, “Whatever he told you – You haven't told me...”

His hips bucked up against Saix, and he felt a hot trickle of satisfaction when he realized his indomitable partner was panting.

“When you need to know...you'll know,” Saix breathed.


“Be thankful that we're as close as we are to finding answers.” Saix's hands moved, supporting him with a hard grip on his ass and encouraging his rutting. “It may just be because of the rat you brought aboard.”

“Yet I haven't heard a single 'thank you',” his eyes narrowed again, pinpricks of pain making his breath hitch.

“You don't need to be congratulated for your lust,” Saix bit back.

“Why not? Xemnas is reaping the rewards of his.”

Saix's snarling voice dropped even lower, a threat. “That's 'Captain', to you.”

“Is it 'Captain' to you, or – how do dogs even address their owners?”

Axel's internal fire ran too hot, and the second his skin started to really burn, Saix shoved away from him and let him drop. Axel barely managed to stay upright, collapsing against the wall with a scowl.

“...He's changed you.”

There was blood on Saix's lips, and he was wiping it off on the back of his hand. Before, Axel noted bitterly, he would have licked it away.

“If becoming whole is truly still your aim, not just lurking in the dark playing conspirator until the end of days, you'll think carefully on what I've told you.” Saix turned on his heel to leave, starting to breathe evenly again as he walked away into the unlit corridor.

“I'll think on it,” Axel glared after him. “I promise.”

Although they hadn't dozed for very long, earlier in the day, Sora had an excess of energy at the most inconvenient of times. They sailed at full speed even in the pitch-black of a cloudy night, and Sora wished he were on-deck to watch and get some air, rather than lying on his side and mentally drawing constellations with the grain and knots on the wooden walls.
He just couldn't drift off, though he'd sleep like the dead once he managed. It wasn't even a busy head keeping him alert, although there was plenty to think about – Sora hated being so contained for so long.

He kind of thought he imagined a knock on the door to sick bay. Why should anyone knock, after all? The doctor never did, and the only other person who might come down to see him -

Riku had the authority to just walk right in, but out of consideration, he'd announced his presence anyway. The door opened, and Sora smiled brightly at him.

“I'm not sure if I'm glad you aren't asleep, or annoyed that you're not resting like you're supposed to be,” Riku's lips twitched. He didn't seem surprised to see him awake, in either case.


“Good enough, I suppose,” Riku closed the door behind him, and came forward to sit.

“What about you? You should be sleeping.”

“I'll sleep when I'm dead. How's your back?”

As well as the healing was coming along, the treatment was almost constant, and Sora had discovered that infections happened more easily at sea. Another scrape had needed to be cleaned and tended to.

“Alright. The stuff they put on stopped stinging pretty quick, but still no strenuous physical activity until they say so,” Sora pouted.

Riku only let himself imagine how soft Sora's lips were for a second. “We'll celebrate once you're allowed... A big sparring match.”

“Yeah?” Sora lit up. “Maybe it's not so bad, then, since once I'm better I'll definitely beat you.”

“We'll see,” Riku scoffed a little, but he was half-consciously watching Sora's lips move.

“Long as you're gonna be here...” A little stiff, Sora began to move, though Riku's mind went in a completely different direction.

As long as he was here, Sora was going to...what? In his mind, the rest of his sentence had something to do with his lips, and letting Riku taste them, but he was absolutely sure that wasn't where Sora was going with that.

“Hm...?”

“I might as well not stay lying down to talk,” Sora sat up, swinging his legs over the side to rest on the gently tilted floor. “So... What'd you come in here for?”

There was the truth. Riku didn't think there would ever be a better time. Back in his cabin, he'd been mulling it over for at least a half-hour before giving up on rest. He wanted to breach the subject but had no idea how.

He needed to tell Sora -

No. He needed to ask him whether or not he felt anything for him, something other than only companionship, and then -
Wait, that was going about it all wrong; he *should* tell Sora first, not pull back like a coward or -

“I thought that if you were still awake, I'd force you to keep me company.”

He just needed to figure out how to go about this.

Slow with sarcasm in all its forms, Sora protested with an incredibly genuine air, “You don't have to *force* me. I don't think you'd have to force anyone to keep you company.”

He was...so sweet.

“I have never met anyone like you,” Riku said, almost wonderingly.

“How?”

“You're...” Damn. He couldn't just say it. “You're a good friend to have around, Sora.”

“Thanks,” Sora beamed. “I can't believe I found a friend like you out here.”

Or maybe he could just tell him, forthright. He was strangely tempted to just lean forward and kiss him, but without knowing for certain whether or not it'd be welcome...

“So we are friends, then?” Riku grinned, hiding nerves. “I'm glad it's not just me thinking that we are.”

“Of course we're friends,” Sora's head tilted slightly. “How could we not be?”

“You're cute,” he laughed, and said it on impulse. The regret was immediate as he watched some of Sora's enthusiasm drain and his cheeks redden.

“Oh, um...”

“I – Sorry, I didn't mean it in any – 'in any strange way'... He couldn't truthfully say that, could he? Riku hesitated. “I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, no,” Sora shook it off. “I'm sorry. I guess I'm used to hearing that from men that are...not like you.”

Something like jealousy prickled under his skin. “What do you mean?”

“I mean not so...” Trying to implicate something, Sora flailed his hand indistinctly.

“Not so...?”

“Well, I dunno,” Sora smiled. “But not the kind of guy who would just come visit me to talk.”

“Oh,” Riku understood, and wished he hadn't. At first, it was guilt; he hadn't come down so late to only speak, had he? Or, he *had*, but of something personal, of wanting something from him.

But that wasn't the same, he determined. He'd be just as happy talking to Sora about the weather. Instead, he was left with the bitter knowledge that Sora was well-versed in having that type of man around him.

“... If it helps, I'll keep comments like those to myself.”

“It... I just didn't expect it, that's all,” Sora shrugged.
Suddenly sounding very serious, Riku leaned forward slightly as a thought occurred to him. “If any of my crew approaches you like that... Tell me, immediately. Alright?”

“Oh,” Sora was momentarily stunned. “Okay, um, sure.”

Sora wanted to protest that he could look out for himself just fine, but for just a second he was reminded of Roxas in that flare of protectiveness. He almost smiled.

“I don't know if they would, for certain... But you know how it can be, for sailors. They get lonely, and you're the most appealing boy on board...”

Sora's cheeks were steadily flooding with color, voice getting quieter. “Yeah, I know how sailors are.”

Riku swallowed, though his mouth was suddenly dry.

He was a fool; sailors, like himself...

He started to rise from his seat. “I'm sorry, maybe I should leave you alone...”

“Wait,” Sora stopped him. He couldn't decipher how Riku was acting, but he didn't want him to leave because of it. “Don't go again already...”

Slowly, Riku ran a hand through his hair, frozen where he stood. “I don't think I should stay. I mean, I'd like to. I like spending time with you. But...”

“Then what's wrong?” Sora was pouting again.

It wasn't fair to confuse him, this way. If Riku was going to tell him, this had to be it... “I like you, Sora, and I also think you're...” Briefly, he trailed off, careful with the words he chose. “I wonder, occasionally, what it would be like to...”

Sora was only growing more bemused. “I like you, too,” he filled the pause.

“... But do you like me enough to kiss me?”

Riku expected a flash of understanding, and – in the worst case – revulsion, anger, or hurt.

Instead, Sora only seemed more baffled, needing a second to piece that together. “Kiss?” he repeated. “O-oh...”

“I'm not saying that you would have to, or that you like me any less if you don't,” Riku tried to smooth over misunderstandings before they could happen. “Or, that you need to prove anything. Just – ” he sank back down into his seat. “- I'd like to kiss you.”

All the confusion cleared and left surprise behind. “That's all you want?” Sora sounded like he might have expected something else. Riku wasn't sure if he was misinterpreting his astonishment... Or, if he was interpreting it at all.

“Not all. I would like to be your friend, too – it's not as though I only want to...” Riku stopped, as Sora's expression hadn't changed. “Unless, you meant... I wouldn't push for anything more.”

Sora's blush went several shades darker. “Sorry. I'm just – I mean, I never know anymore...”

“I won't ask what you've had to deal with, in the past.” If he knew, Riku was sure he'd only react with jealousy and irritation. “For now, just tell me: do you want me to kiss you, or should I leave you...”
alone?”

Immediately, Sora clung to Riku's sleeve with wider eyes. “Don't leave.”

“I didn't mean leave altogether,” Riku reassured him. “I just wouldn't mention it again, if that's what you want.”

The fear dissolved and Sora's smile returned, a little more shy. “You can, if you want to.” Something occurred to him the second it was out of his mouth, and he abruptly added, “Not... Not just because I don't want you to leave.”

Riku hadn't realized how much the clarification meant to him, but the relief was palpable. He only hesitated a second before moving in close enough to press his lips against Sora's, simple and soft. Sora pulled himself to the edge of the cot, sort of liking the idea of being tucked against him rather than leaning in from afar, and tried to remember the last time he'd just been kissed like this.

Possibly never.

Riku didn't demand anything from it, nor did he take. When Sora moved close enough to invite it, he wrapped his arms around the smaller frame, and drew back a little before temptation could sink its hooks in.

Sora didn't look quite so distressed about his blush, now. “Are we... allowed to do that?”

It was hard not to lick his lips. Even harder not to kiss Sora again. Riku grinned faintly. “Yes and no.”

“Why yes and why no?”

“Yes, because it's my ship and I make the rules. No, because... You're still healing, and fraternization is discouraged, if nothing else.”

Sora drew himself out of Riku's arms a little, but not enough to be discouraging. “Well, I liked doing that.”

“So did I.” Riku was a little relieved.

“Then it's not really bad, is it?” Sora tilted his chin up a little and closed his eyes, anticipating it when Riku's lips descended.

But they didn't quite meet his, hovering a scant inch away, letting Sora decide whether or not they'd kiss again. He blinked, not realizing that Riku was testing his reaction, and corrected the situation; the small gap was sealed, and this time, Riku wasn't so hesitant.

Sora's hand cautiously lifted to brush through his hair. He'd entertained idle fantasies of touching it before, just about every time it moved in the breeze or caught the light, but even with all his daydreaming, he'd never been able to imagine the feeling; like silk through his fingers.

Riku guided his lips apart, tongue only just brushing Sora's lips with only a suggestion of deepening it. It was all slow and the sensuality was unfamiliar, wresting a small groan out of Sora that neither of them expected.

That was Riku's new favorite sound. He needed to hear it again, but he also needed to watch himself – Riku wouldn't let his hands roam, or kiss him too hard, or too demanding -
He leaned over Sora a little and was tugged even closer by the shirt.

“Mn-...” Sora made another beautiful noise in response to Riku lightly sucking at his lower lip, his chest arching up.

Riku broke the kiss with visible reluctance and met Sora's eyes, when they reopened.

“Would you sleep with me?”

Sora's eyes went perfectly round. “I don't know – I mean, I don't usually even let anyone kiss me, except Roxas – ”

“Rest with me, in my quarters,” Riku corrected himself, blood rushing to his cheeks and matching Sora's blush perfectly. They were both slightly mortified – Sora more so for mentioning his brother – but the moment passed quickly enough for uncertain contentment to take its place.

“...Yes, I will,” Sora relaxed, accepting Riku's help sitting up again. “But I don't understand how you could... I mean, about me.”

Riku understood, and replied honestly. “You're the first person I've encountered in a long time who treats me like a person. Not like a Captain, or their lesser who doesn't deserve his place, or the like.”

“That should just be normal, I think.” Sora stood up beside him.

“... I'm glad I met you,” Riku grinned.

“Me too, even if you are a little weird,” Sora smiled back.

Riku stole a quick kiss in retaliation, this time, and Sora made sure it lasted long enough to kiss him back.

Chapter End Notes

We'd like to thank everyone who wished us well while we were away. Our cons our done until mid-summer, and our move was successful, but there have been unexpected complications. Hopefully, though, these won't impact our writing ability. We're going to tentatively say we're back on schedule but don't be surprised if there are still delays from time to time. In any case, our other fic will definitely get an update this Wednesday. Not to mention we have some short series and oneshots in the works and hopefully coming to you very soon!
HELLO ALL. WE’VE MISSED YOU SO.

We've taken down the false chapter 12, but in case you missed it, we posted a note informing everyone about our writing delays and received beautiful comments and support. We were stuck in an unfortunate situation that prevented us from getting chapters out, but now we're back on track and will be updating this fic every Monday, as we were on our prior schedule!

Also in case you missed it in all the lack-of-updates (wild times, right?) we also posted a XemSai one-shot called 'Mate' that both explores their dynamic in this fic, and also gives a little more plot context. It takes place in the middle of chapter 11, so if you want to refresh your memory, I recommend going back and reading it, stopping before you get to the part with Axel, reading 'Mate', and then resuming from there. Go on, chapter 12 will wait.

Are you back? Do you remember what's going on? Good! Hope you enjoy and thank you all for your patience and your kindness!

Riku had assured him that there would be no need to wake as early as he needed to, and that he was at perfect liberty to rest in his cabin for as long as he required – all day, if need be, though he had suggested it with a sly sort of look on his face that made Sora protest. He didn't like being idle, and he hadn't done anything to aggravate his back lately.

Stretched out on Riku's bed, though, Sora had to admit he was reconsidering getting up. Just a little. Dozily, he'd bade the Captain farewell with his 'good morning', but found himself unable to fall properly back asleep. Maybe it was the way his lips were still tingling a little from the kiss only an hour ago, shared with nothing but affection between them. It could have been the comforting scent of the bedspread and the sleep clothes he'd borrowed.

His head was just...buzzing. Pleasantly, even with the ever-present worry at the back of his mind. Sora was the closest to carefree he'd been in a very long time.

Eyes slipping closed, Sora yawned wide and buried the side of his face into a plush pillow.

A knock against the door, followed by a shout of, “Captain, sir?” robbed him of the possibility of drifting off like that. Sora's head jerked up a little, uncertain how to respond.

The crew had no reason to bother him in his quarters, Riku had said; he hadn't thought there was any reason to brief him on how to act, if someone came by anyway.

But, surely they wouldn't just barge in without an invitation -

Sora had sat up, almost springing from the bed, when the crewman opened the door and stared straight at him.

“Ah -” Caught off-guard in his attempt to grab the neat pile of his clothing, Sora's back hit a cabinet,
sending some trinkets atop of it falling.

The crewman just stared. “... You?”

Scrambling to pick things up, Sora stammered. “I-I was just waiting... For the captain...”

“In his clothing?” the man’s lip curled, unimpressed.

“Yes...?” Sora’s heart was hammering. ‘Fraternization is discouraged’, Riku had said... Surely neither of them would be in trouble for this, but... That didn't mean they couldn't treat Riku badly for doing so.

Sora was an outsider. He wasn't popular with the crew. Perhaps some of the men had even entertained thoughts about being in his position. If they perceived this as some manner of betrayal...

“We had a feeling, below deck,” the man's eyes had narrowed, tone lofty with disdain.

“It's really not anything bad,” Sora clutched a golden, spindly device. “I didn't have any other clothes – or a place to stay outside of sick bay...”

“The men and I suspected you were distracting the Captain, and your excuses don't justify your actions,” he spoke right over him, turning away slightly. Sora squirmed.

“I have no motives -”

“Do you know where the Captain is?” He cut Sora off.

“... Meeting with the boatswain, I think?”

“Yes, where?” His tone was clipped. “Don't tell me you're both a distraction and ignorant?”

“Hey-...” Sora began to frown, starting to take offense. A 'distraction' – what did he know? “I mean, I don't know, but -”

“Or maybe,” the man looked towards him piercingly, “you're purposefully both.”

It took a second to understand what he was being accused of, and then Sora defended himself in earnest. “I have no intention of causing the Captain or the crew -”

“What proof do we have that you aren't a saboteur?” The man spat. “The Captain's word?”

It was clear he thought very little of that, cementing Sora's burgeoning worry that this would all condemn Riku to even less respect. If he just had Riku vouch for him, would they think less of him?

He had to lift the responsibility from Riku.

“You... You don't need to know what I am, and neither does he,” Sora lifted his chin a little, bolder than he felt, and not actually sure what he was trying to say. The crewman had tensed, even more narrow-eyed and suspicious.

“You've warped his sense of duty to his crew -”

“That's enough.”

Sora's eyes widened, grip on the trinket relaxing and letting it drop. The crewman's back went straight, saluting as he was expected to in the presence of his superior officer, but he had yet to look
away from Sora. Riku was in the open doorway, striding forward into his quarters with an expression wiped even.

“What were you doing in my quarters?” he fired at the crewman.

“It was an emergency situation, Captain. Change in the wind. A storm's approaching, could very well tear the ship apart – they thought they saw lightning on the horizon.”

“Can we dock safely?” Riku immediately went to the map. “Last I checked, we were near enough to harbor…”

“We may not reach it in time, Captain, and we'd fall further behind.”

“Oh course we would,” Riku muttered gravely, staring down at the plotted course on his chart. He should have expected this, he thought. Any time anyone had gotten so close, something had always happened to turn the tides... The sea favored the pirates. It was always the way. ”Try. Better we wait it out than meet our ends at the hands of a storm. We can re-supply, if the town has anything to offer.”

All the while, Sora was silent and on the receiving end of the crewman's disdainful glower.

“Yes, Captain,” the man saluted again.

“I'll start tying down the supplies below deck, Captain,” Sora kept his head down, and moved quickly to duck past him. Riku thought to stop him, to catch him on his way past and have him stay put so he could come back to him later...

But he didn't. “Yes, dismissed,” Riku closed and locked the door to his quarters, once they'd scattered to carry out his instructions, before going straight to the helm himself.

The following few hours were wracked with stress, the crew preparing the ship for the onslaught on its way and furtively spreading the word that the young interloper had bedded their Captain. Riku felt little need to speak unless he was giving orders, spending any and every moment he could on trying to plot their new course of action. They'd gotten too close to just continue this way, in endless (fruitless) pursuit.

With the shore visible and the storm nearly upon them, there came a point when Riku had to put off thinking on it for later. He took an active role in re-tethering cannons that had managed to shake loose, redistributing weight as waves hurtled against the side of The Highwind.

It was a miracle they managed to escape open water in time, and even more so that the lightning did not chase them all the way to port. Every crash of thunder was so immediate and deafening, though, that it brought on numerous flinches every time.

“Everyone is to stay on-board and tend to the ship while we wait this out. Be ready to depart the moment this clears,” Riku ordered, a touch haggard and smoothing sweat-damp bangs off his forehead. Those who had been below deck were coming back up to hear the instructions and get a glimpse of their surroundings, Sora among them.

He tried to be attentive, without looking at Riku too directly. He hadn't been deaf to the whispers.

“I'll be retiring to my cabin to plan our next move, and I'm not to be disturbed until we're ready to set sail. Understood?”

There was a chorus of 'Yes, Captain', each man as grudging as the next, and it was good fortune that
they were too busy grumbling to notice Riku's subtle gesture to Sora. He bade him to follow with a frown, taking long strides towards his quarters without waiting to see if Sora would.

Fidgeting a little, he waited until everyone around seemed to have lost interest before darting after Riku. He'd dallied; the door was closed, and he knocked in quick succession.

The door was pulled open immediately, Riku murmuring, “Quickly...”

“I don't think I should be here,” Sora darted inside, chewing his lip.

“I need to know what happened.” Riku shut the door, locking it with a loud 'click'. Sora followed the movement of his hands, leaving shallow teeth marks where he'd been biting down.

“... I was just resting and he knocked and I kept quiet, thinking he'd go away, but I couldn't stop him from just coming in.”

“And he knows,” Riku finished grimly, tense. He went to sit down, muttering, “They know.”

Weakly, Sora nodded. “I tried to tell him you were just giving me what I needed...” Slowly, he inhaled, steeling himself a little. “I think I should stay below deck... At least until we get close to finding Roxas...”

“And what happens when they hear, below deck?” Riku sounded a little sharp, with worry.

“At least there will be less fuel for the rumors,” Sora hesitated. “And maybe... If you could lend me a little money, I could buy my own clothes...”

Riku regarded him for a moment, tone difficult to read. “We aren't docked for very long. I could let you go, with some money... But I don't know if you'll be on board, when we leave.”

“At the next port, then,” Sora's lower lip began to jut. “I would leave the ship and save you the trouble if I could, but...”

“Your brother,” Riku finished.

“Yeah...” his eyes flickered to the floor, momentarily caught up in the wash of guilt and not noticing Riku get to his feet.

“And?”

Sora blinked cluelessly. “And?”

Riku was regarding him without expanding on what he was asking, and Sora felt obliged to fill the unusually tense silence.

“...I don't want to leave, but I'll only cause trouble for you. Anyway, I don't belong here – I belong with Roxy...”

“I heard you agree, that you might be a saboteur,” Riku cut him off. Sora fell quiet, having forgotten he'd even said such a thing. “If you were... You probably would've told me, just now, that sticking around the ship had something to do with me.”

Sora hadn't any idea what to say. He didn't want to be told to leave, especially out of anger or mistrust... But if Riku appeared to trust him a little less, the crew surely wouldn't give him such a hard time.
“Not that I think you are one, anyway,” Riku smirked faintly. “I don't think you're conniving enough.”

“Hey,” Sora protested without any real feeling, eyes lowering. “... Maybe it would be better if I was. That way, when I have to leave, your only crime is being tricked.”

“I'd be discredited,” Riku informed him. “Probably stripped of rank.”

Sora winced. “But if they think I'm a distraction, or getting special treatment...”

“You're not an official part of my crew. Any treatment I give you can't be linked back to how I treat them.”

“... It would make more sense if you had taken me from the tavern where I used to work...” Sora said softly.

Though Riku hadn't forgotten where Sora had come from, the statement still left him puzzled. “What do you mean...?”

“If I'd been your, um...” he went red, and Riku's color quickly rose to match.

“Oh,” he cleared his throat. “I'm not the type of man to -”

“I know!” Sora seemed a little mortified that he'd accidentally insinuated anything. “But...at least then I'd have a place here...”

Uncertain how to take that, Riku collected himself before inquiring, “Is...that the place you want...?”

For a second – the longest second of Riku's life, he'd wager – Sora was quiet. “...I want to work,” he said, finally. “I want to fight. I want to be useful, and help you...”

“... The only way I could really accommodate those wants would be to make you part of the crew, in some manner,” Riku sighed. “And even if you were trained, you aren't staying...”

“Then, I have to fit in somehow that won't make the crew suspicious of me anymore,” Sora determined, gazing up at Riku before unexpectedly sliding to one knee before him. “This is your ship, you have to command me.”

Having Sora at his feet was doing nothing to help him think. Impulsively, he thought he might touch his face or his hair, but he held back.

“If only you were in a position to be apprenticed... If you had any intention of joining the naval ranks...”

Sora lowered his head. “The only thing I really want is to help people...but I have to follow Roxas.”

“I know,” Riku reassured him, but his eyes grew slightly narrow and his tone a touch bitter as he said, “Loyalty to one's family can't come second to anything.”

His gaze flickered up to the captain's face. That hadn't seemed directed at him. “So,” he looked tentative, “can you do something to fit me in, while I'm still here?”

Riku's train of thought returned. “I'll do my best to,” he vowed. “However... If you're going to be counted among my crew in any real way, you and I...”

Slowly, Sora nodded. “... I know.”
“We shouldn't have, to begin with,” Riku muttered, apology writ underneath the words. “That was my lack of judgment.”

“No, that-...” Sora got back to his feet, upset stirring. “I'm not sorry, for that...”

“Perhaps you should be. One of us ought to be sorry.”

The fact that Riku looked ashamed of himself pained Sora too much for him to maintain any semblance of logic or self-control. He dove in, pressing a brief kiss to Riku's lips and trying to wipe away any of the bad things Riku thought he'd done.

But the kiss didn't stay brief. Riku pulled him a little closer, and Sora's hands flew up to rest against him.

They were doing the right thing. He was sure of it. But... Sora still couldn't help wondering what he'd miss. What more could have come from the two of them being-...

Riku drew back, and Sora opened eyes that he hadn't consciously closed.

“... We really shouldn't,” Riku murmured, reluctant but genuine.

“I know,” Sora was blushing. “But doesn't it feel...unfinished, like this?”

“Maybe it's better this way,” he avoided looking into Sora's eyes. “We didn't get far enough into us to even know how to properly end it.”

Drooping a little, Sora took his hands away. “Maybe.”

“I wish we could be something.” As though the loss of touch had been the final nail in the coffin, Riku took a step back, out of arm's reach.

“I do really like you, Riku, and I think you're an amazing Captain,” Sora bit his lip. “I don't want that ruined because of me...”

“If my crew doesn't respect me because of how I treat you, then I'm not doing my job properly.”

“I probably shouldn't have shown them up...”

That, at least, made Riku smile. “That probably didn't help their impression of you.”

Sheepishly, he shrugged with a little laugh, the capability returning as the heavy mood eased off. “I hope I can still spar you someday.”

“Maybe if I beat you in front of them, they'd be less hostile,” Riku pondered.

“I couldn't let that happen,” Sora's competitive spirit flared, and things between them felt easy again. Riku smirked, as much his equal again when they had those wooden swords in-hand.

“Well, I didn't say you'd 'let' me.”

“Good, that'd be no fun,” Sora declared, closing the distance enough to take one of Riku's hands without thinking about it. Riku's eyes flickered down, but he made no move to pull away.

Sora couldn't seem to help touching him, and Riku didn't want to make him stop. Besides, they were both rationalizing; they were still friends, and there was nothing strange about friends being close.
“Sparring aside,” Riku ran his thumb gently over the back of Sora's hand, “we can't be together too often.”

“Then I'll go back to sleeping below deck,” Sora nodded. “And then as soon as we get Roxas back... I'll go.”

“And we'll likely never see each other again,” Riku concluded, a little hollow. Sora swallowed down a lump that had risen to his throat.

“...Don't see how we would.”

“I have my ship, my orders... You'll have your brother and your life.”

“And we'll always be friends,” Sora broke in brightly, with a cheer he didn't feel.

Riku was unable to resist giving him a faint grin, in spite of his feelings. “Always.”

When he wasn't under scrutiny, being poked and prodded and prompted, Roxas's cleaning duties were never-ending. The ship was insurmountably massive, for one person to be shafted with the majority of such duties, but Xemnas obviously had more important tasks to delegate to his more 'talented' crew.

But for the time being, while the ship was being badly rocked by the unending storm Larxene was conjuring, Roxas had been excused to grab his requisite few hours of sleep and wasn't able to catch a wink of it, so far.

He thought about going to Axel's cabin, preferring his stiff cot and warmth to his lone hammock, but he was pretty sure that he was above deck with Marluxia and Larxene for reasons undisclosed to him. He was handy picking locks, but without Axel present, it felt a little...pointless.

Although, there were plenty of other locks to pick.

There was a door he hadn't been through, that time Axel had led him around and let him take trinkets from every room. Marluxia's room; Axel had told him dismissively that there was nothing of interest in there, but Roxas thought he should be the one to determine that for himself. And, now, the target it presented was simply too much for a sleep-deprived and angry thief. Pressing his ear to the door, he listened carefully, wanting to be absolutely certain that there was no one in there before setting to work.

Not a peep. Roxas grinned, and drew back, fishing a bit of metal from his pocket but leaning into the handle first.

If he'd still had his ear to the door, he might have heard a very soft gasp, but it wasn't likely.

It only took a few moments for Roxas to hear the telltale 'click', and for the lock to cooperate. Withdrawing the bit of metal, he pocketed it again and very gently pushed the door open, seeing nothing but pitch darkness within. A trick of the dimness; he thought he saw some movement within, but heard nothing.
Still not a problem. He could light a candle, but would risk leaving evidence of his presence that way. Instead, he stuck his palm back out the door, gathering light from the hall lanterns in one palm – the only thing he could consistently do since discovering his powers. It formed a bright ball in his hand, and he hastened to shut the door again before it could be noticed.

Then he started, badly, for he'd been wrong about the room being empty.

Limp blonde hair fell in the girl's partially hidden face, a broad pad of bound paper clutched against her chest and concealing all but her eyes. She was trying to shrink into the chair she was seated in, but couldn't move otherwise; it took Roxas a second to notice, but the light glinted against metal at her feet. Thick metal cuffs, binding her ankles and keeping her tethered to the floor.

Her panic faded, but her eyes were still wide as she lowered her papers, clutching it with blackened fingertips. Roxas was sure his expression was almost a mirror of hers, his shock becoming trepidation.

“... It's you,” she sounded confused, staring at him, and the absurdity was oddly...calming.

“I didn't think anyone would be in here,” Roxas stared right back.

“... Who are you?”

The gears in his head were creaking, starting to make the connections that could save him from giving himself away entirely. He was reluctant to give his name, but the shackles... “You're not part of the crew. You're a prisoner?”

The light cast odd shadows on her face. Roxas held it up, and though she flinched as her eyes tried to readjust, she smiled in a sad sort of way. “You haven't been here long.”

“I,” Roxas tried to retract the glow a little, feeling dumb. “I thought prisoners would have been in the brig.”

“Most times, they would be,” the girl was blinking often, eyes still strained, but she was starting to regain her vision well enough to appraise him. “You're not quite like them, are you? But alike.”

Roxas's brow knitted in confusion, but understood well enough to wonder how she knew. “Yes...”

“You'd be like me, then,” she rested the pad of paper against her knees. “If you weren't a pirate.”

“I'm not a pirate,” he immediately defended himself, but was forcibly reminded of all he'd done in the last little while. Obeying their Captain, fighting alongside Axel... Looting a dead man's cabin. “Or... At least not one like them.”

“They must not think so.”

“I was only allowed to stay as part of the crew because of this...power I have, whatever it is,” Roxas was back on the defensive.

The girl nodded. “If they didn't see potential in you, you'd still be a prisoner.” Her eyes lowered, and with them, her volume dropped. “It's not such a bad thing, I think.”

“... What do you mean?” he asked cautiously.

“Being part of the crew doesn't always mean being loyal to the Captain. It doesn't mean you can't be free,” she lifted her book to her chest again, arms wrapping around it for comfort. “It means you have
a choice, in how much you help them.”

Stunned, Roxas stared at her. She seemed to know much, and that struck him as all the stranger. “I... guess. What about you?”

“I'm not given choices.”

His throat felt a little tight. Maybe he'd actually managed to fall asleep, his mind whispered. Maybe he'd just invented this girl in his dreams, to showcase how much worse things could be.

“... Why are you here, anyway?” Roxas eyed the shackles.

“I'm like them too, I suppose,” she squinted at Roxas's hand. “You have light... They have water and wind and earth... And I have,” she hesitated, “something they need.”

“You have some kind of power, too,” he deciphered, and sighed. “I see.”

“That's the main reason,” she trailed off inaudibly. “I have other values, I suppose.”

He didn't catch most of what she'd said. “Sorry?”

“How long have you been here?” she asked, without answering.

“Not all that long,” Roxas thought about it. How long had it been...? “Not long enough to know you were here.”

Slowly, the girl began to turn the book. “I see. Less than a month, perhaps?”

“I can't exactly keep-...” he cut himself off, being shown what the girl had drawn. “What is this...?”

Slowly, she was turning page over page, one after the other, and every single one was a sketch of a familiar face. Wild, mussed hair, the familiar lines of that face -

“I've been drawing these for one month,” she kept turning the pages, and Roxas sank to his knees to get closer to her level.

“This is my brother,” he pronounced, eyes becoming round and desperate. “When did you see him?!”

“...I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I didn't. This isn't you?”

“No,” what little hope Roxas thought he'd felt was snuffed. “He's... gone.”

He couldn't say he was dead, even though the ongoing lack of news made him think it might be so. He only had Axel's word for it, that he wasn't.

“How can you draw a person you've never seen?”

Gently, she rested the sketchbook on her lap again. “I do it all the time.”

Roxas's gaze found her face. “That's what you do, isn't it?”

“That's one thing I do.”

Her cryptic attitude was beginning to rouse suspicion in Roxas. “What else?”

“... I know things. Some things.” She was looking at him, but not... at him; Roxas got the sense she
was staring right through, and it left him feeling vulnerable and unnerved. “Your brother can’t be very far, you know.”

“... How do you know that?”

“I wouldn’t be drawing him if he wasn’t.”

“Do you know anything about where he is?” he demanded. “Is he okay?!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know,” she shrank into the chair again, frightened by the growing intensity, and Roxas backed off.

“... Then maybe you could give me some other answers,” he sighed, settling back on his heels.

“I could try,” she agreed, voice a mite higher and biting her lip. “But Marluxia can't know.”

Roxas nodded, starting to get to his feet. “I’ve probably stayed too long,” he glanced away. “I’ll come see you again.”

He'd get answers later, when she'd had time to recover from the fright he'd given her. Roxas felt a little bad, and although he pressingly wanted to understand what was going on – and hear something about Sora – he'd only scare her again, like this.

He needed to collect himself. And, he realized, figure out exactly what he even wanted to ask.

“... You should probably find some allies,” she girl suggested timidly. “This crew isn't safe from itself.”

“I have... close enough to an ally,” Roxas refused to let himself make that mistake aloud. “What are you?”

“Marluxia's prisoner.”

From what he'd seen of Marluxia, he couldn't even imagine what that meant, for the girl. “Does that make you my friend, or my enemy?”

“It means... I will help you, if I can,” she plucked a bit of sketching coal from between her knees as she spoke. “But I have to do what he tells me.”

That was probably as close to being an ally of his that she could be, Roxas realized, and the risk that came with that was likely beyond his scope.

“... I understand. If I can ever find a way to be free from this, I'll take you with me,” he promised.

She didn't appear to take it much to heart. “That’s a nice thing to say,” she murmured, finding a blank page and not lifting her eyes. However long she'd been here, they'd done a marvelous job of defeating the girl's ability to hope, and it made the emptiness in Roxas's chest pang.

He could relate. He also couldn't let the Never Was crew do that to him.

“I'll be back as soon as I can,” he turned towards the door, but stopped. “Uh, do you need anything?”

Taken aback by the offer, it took the girl a moment to smile. “No. Thank you.”

Nonetheless, Roxas glanced from the light in his palm to the unlit lantern, and flicked it towards the
unlit candle. It didn't create a fire, per se, but something more like a phantom of one. The light was bright, and didn't flicker.

“That should last a little while,” he glanced at her. “It...should make drawing easier.”

The girl seemed a little awed, and some real relief bled through the sadness in her expression.

“Thank you... I—Thank you,” she stammered, a little at a loss for words.

Roxas felt the pang turn into something else, like a squirming thing. It was uncomfortable, and he'd forgotten how to identify it – guilt?

Pity?

“It's nothing,” Roxas pressed his ear to the door, listening hard, and slipped out of Marluxia's room once he’d figured out how to lock it again from the inside.

Namine watched him leave, basking in the light for just a little while before starting to put the coal to paper, worry rekindling when the shapes became the now-familiar face of a boy again.

The storm went on for much longer than anyone could have anticipated. Flash thunderstorms usually came and went in little time, the sailing master had told him that morning, and moved on with the wind. By all the experience and logic in the world, it didn't make sense for them to have been trapped at port until nightfall, and by that time Riku had found it more productive to let his men off the ship to enjoy land for a few hours while he thought in peace.

There was only one course of action he could come up with, and the prospect made him feel like a little boy again. The coast of the Kingdom was only one port away, if they took an efficient route, and they could call in the cavalry – in a manner of speaking – from there. They had tried to pursue The Ship That Never Was with fleets, before, with woeful results... But this time, and his approach, would be different.

If he continued to pursue the ship and drove them to a point they could be flanked, prevented from going further without engaging... The Highwind would catch up, and the battle could be three-on-one. Perhaps even more, depending on what support he could get.

Unusual as the Never Was crew might be, they couldn't last against an unending tide of soldiers.

The only thing was... Even after Riku came to terms with losing much of the ground they'd gained, even after he admitted that the lives that would be lost were acceptable casualties... He would be going home.

He'd need to face his father, and ask for help.

He'd need to face the Admiral, and ask him to let Sora help.

Riku backed off from his charts, dragging a hand across his face and striding towards the doors. He needed the air to clear his head – he knew this course of action was best, but his personal feelings were clouding the way. He was Captain, he reminded himself as he locked the door. All men were
weak to their emotions, and he had to be more than a man. He had to be strong, always.

Not surprising him in the least, the majority of the crew was still on land somewhere, and anyone who remained must have remained below deck. The only person in sight was Sora, swinging one of the wooden swords, testing his strength.

If anything could take his mind off of things, Sora always could. Amused, Riku kept quiet as he came upon him, watching him shift from one stance to another with a bit of a frown.

A lack of practice had left him slower than he used to be, but his back was no longer such an issue. Sora tried to imitate the way he and Roxas used to practice, knowing the movements and the rhythm, controlling his breathing and pushing his weight into every strike against an imaginary foe.

Still not as fast – that was frustrating – but it still felt good to do this without pain, anymore.

With the only sounds being his own footfalls and breaths, he didn't expect a loud clatter by his foot, and only experience kept him from jumping. Instead Sora turned sharply, wooden sword held in offense, but he smiled and lowered it the second he realized what had happened.

“Are you about to attack the Captain?” Riku teased, going to grab the coin purse.

“Riku!” Sora beamed.

“Because if you are, I think it's only honorable that you let me arm myself.” Riku passed him, tucking it back into his coat and brushing the blindfold pensively before deciding not to use it. He removed his coat, raising one eyebrow at Sora in an obvious challenge.

“You might regret that,” Sora laughed, waiting for him to get one of the practice swords as well before raising his own again. His heart was already beating a little faster, having been looking forward to another match with him since the last time they'd dueled.

And surely it was only exhilaration that made his heart flutter, not the cocky grin as Riku leveled the sword at him or the way the wind caught his hair as he tossed it back.

Riku took a defensive stance, inviting Sora wordlessly to take the first blow. Rather than just lunge, Sora displayed just how much more confident he was compared to last time, sliding his blade along Riku's in a taunt.

It was strangely...exciting. Just the build-up, the air between them almost crackling. But as much as Riku was enjoying it, he had to take the opening that was being offered. Swiftly, he knocked the end of Sora's sword down, flicking his own towards his stomach. Sora stepped back quickly, twirling his sword around and blocking in front.

He had to be faster than Riku to beat him. That would be a challenge, but he was always up for one. Forcing his way forward, Sora put strength into his blows, Riku blocking his strikes with a loud crack heralding every success. It was like they'd brought the storm back upon the ship – it was loud, but Sora's bubbly laugh was louder.

He was having fun, and Riku's anxieties were flowing away.

Sora nearly squeaked when Riku suddenly braced his hand against the flat of the blade and pushed, nearly knocking him off-balance for putting as much body into the strike as he had. Sora had to double back to regain his footing and try to get around Riku, but the strike to his side met Riku's front again, and his blade. Sensing a stalemate, though, Riku began to hit back to take the offensive
position from him, with more strength than he'd meant to use.

Sora's instincts were on par with his surprise, and while he was forced to bend at the knee to get his sword between him and Riku's, his own reserves were far from depleted. With a grin, he pushed back up, hard.

Riku didn't have time to blink, and flipped to the side, going to outmaneuver him rather than be pushed back. It was like he'd expected; Sora dove, swinging his sword in an arc to intercept his landing, and Riku had to fight to regain his footing on the landing. His sword caught Sora's at the hilt, nearly sending it spinning, but he grabbed it with his other hand to keep from losing it.

He had Riku on the run – he was moving back quickly as Sora rained down as many blows as possible while he still could, sword held to take the brunt. If Sora could just get around it –

But unexpectedly, Riku was barreling forward, right into him with the sword still held defensively. Sora let out a startled cry, tripping backwards and finding his feet taken out from under him.

They both paused, in that instant – Riku to see whether or not the fall had hurt him, Sora for the same reason. With no yelp of pain or indication that he needed to stop, though, Sora sprang into motion first, crawling back a few paces and managing to avoid Riku's sword, coming down in an arc where he'd only just been.

Sora swung around to get up, sword still between his body and Riku, but the position was weak. The sword was sent spinning over the deck, landing several feet away.

On reflex, Riku stepped back, but could have kicked himself for it. He'd given Sora an opening; he lunged for his fallen weapon, and almost managed to grab it before Riku leapt over to it and kicked the sword away.

So close, unarmed, and on the ground... It looked like Sora had been bested. Riku advanced on him a little, but offered his hand with a smirk. “You are much better when you're healed.”

Marginally, Sora frowned. However Riku had meant it, he could read both the sympathy and the superiority there. There was no way he'd let that stand. Sora shifted, like he was about to take the proffered hand, and grinned broadly.

He rolled to the side and got a running start, tucking his legs as he leapt and flipped himself onto the upper deck.

“Much better,” Riku was startled, backing up quickly to grab Sora's fallen sword before coming back to him.

“You're not the only one who knows some flashy tricks,” Sora called, taunting, and blindly searched for a replacement weapon. They were everywhere around deck, surely -

His hand found a hilt and he drew it, metal squealing as he pulled the real blade from the stand. Sora froze.

“... You aren't planning on using that to keep up, are you?” Riku raised an eyebrow and called, clearly taunting right back. Sora was almost offended, until he understood the game.

“I think you're out of surprises,” he got his grip on it and readied the sword, watching Riku below. If it was going to be an unfair fight, he reasoned, it might as well be unfair in his favor. Riku obviously didn't mind.
“For the sake of amusing myself, I'll let you believe that.” Riku had stopped right below him, and Sora wasn't sure which of the two sets of steps he was going to make a break for to get to him. As he should have expected, the answer was neither. Riku sprang, knowing his own acrobatic way up to the upper deck, and landed almost too-close – both wooden swords locked around Sora's.

“I'm glad the crew's not around this time,” Sora said innocently, preparing himself to take a few more risks. The practice swords couldn't hurt him, and if he was going to beat Riku... And he was going to beat Riku. “I wouldn't want them to see this.”

He jerked and turned sharply to Riku's left, taking one of the practice swords against his shoulder, but it felt a worthwhile blow when the result was disarming the Captain and sending the practice swords straight down. Riku didn't fight it – he let the swords go, and flipped backwards to get his hand on the hilt of one of the real swords.

“Don't worry,” he smirked as he drew it. “I don't think there'll be anything to see.”

Taking a steeling breath, Sora nodded towards the sword. “Now I feel much better about this,” he laughed. Somewhere in the mocking repartee, though, he did mean that.

Riku's eyes narrowed a little, the tip of his sword meeting Sora's and sliding down with a grating sound – mimicry of the first move Sora teased him with – but he then knocked the end aside, trying to force his hand away. Again, in an echo of how it started, Sora twirled the blade to recover and immediately darted forward.

He was more nimble with a real sword compared to a bulky wooden one, and he was succeeding in getting the point within an uncomfortable distance. Riku had to lean back, striking back once or twice before catching the sword tip with his own, guiding it right to the deck and giving him the opportunity to side-step around Sora to strike at him with the hilt. He took a bit of the blow, whipping around quickly and bringing the blade across wide in a move that would slash Riku right open.

Sora trusted that he wouldn't, and Riku didn't disappoint. He flipped to the side and landed low, leg lashing out to sweep Sora's out from under him.

“Whoa-”

He hadn't expected Sora to barrel his way, grabbing at Riku unthinkingly for support and bringing them both onto the ground. Riku barely had time to think, but abandoned his sword before it could catch or impale them on the way down, and they were both left unarmed and sprawled against each other. Breathing hard, Riku let himself go a bit limp, and found that Sora had no intention yet of moving, either.

“... I think you won,” Riku reluctantly admitted.

“What do you mean?” Sora exhaled, frowning. “I just let myself get tripped.”

“Brought me down with you,” he pointed out.

“And I always will,” Sora grinned, in return, and they were kissing each other before either of them had thought it through.

As hard as they'd fought, the kiss was soft. Not chaste, though it certainly started that way. With a quiet noise of content, Sora's lips parted and warmth spread through him from the tip of his tongue right into his core. Riku's arm found a place around him, holding him close until he remembered first.
“... I'm sorry,” he murmured, starting to push himself upright. Sora followed suit, shaking his head a little, and meeting Riku's palm as it rose up to his jaw. In spite of his apology, Riku didn't want to separate just yet... And that suited Sora just fine.

Riku's lips were a little reddened from the kiss, and Sora couldn't seem to stop looking at them.

“So... You think I won?” He was even more out of breath, now.

“Well... Seeing as I just claimed my prize, now, I'd argue I won...”

“Claimed?”

“The kiss.” Riku looked both abashed and amused.

“Oh!” Sora rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed at his hopelessness when it came to flirting – that was what made Roxas the performer, and not him, he lamented. Riku got up, dusting himself off and going to return the swords to their proper place, which Sora scrambled to help with.

He felt pleasantly worn out, but there was a new sort of restlessness buzzing under his skin. Sora followed him back down to the deck, and struggled to find something to say. Riku had withdrawn a bit, and he found he could recognize particular things in Riku, now.

The tendency to get caught up in his own idea of responsibilities and blame was definitely one of them, and while Sora wouldn't call it 'brooding'...

“Well, he wouldn't call it brooding to Riku's face.”

“If I claim something back, could we call it a tie?” Sora suggested, wanting to break Riku out of a reverie before he could sink into one.

“I suppose,” Riku glanced at him, going to put his jacket back on. “What did you have in mind?”

“I haven't thought of it yet,” Sora shrugged, but glanced over at the docks. “Um, should we maybe keep talking about this...somewhere else?”

A few of the crewman were starting to meander back towards the ship, and Riku nodded quickly. “My cabin shouldn't be used, in case anyone sees you coming out, but... There's likely still no one down in sick bay.”

Sora agreed, and the two of them went below deck in silence. That crackling air between them had returned, but without the swords – maybe they both were gauging what move to make and when, but once they'd reached the privacy of sick bay, neither of them had figured out what to do.

Riku took a moment to tend to the light, waving a little more oxygen to the fire to make it flare, and then closed the lantern again. As though a little more light made all the difference, though, Riku found the words he wanted as he turned to Sora, reaching out to lightly trail his fingers over his jaw again.

“Do you want this?” he asked, voice barely a mutter. Sora had started to lean in, anticipating that Riku would kiss him, but halted at the question.

“Want it?” he repeated. “I mean, it's not like I don't...”

“I need more than that,” Riku drew back a little, uncomfortable with his wording. “I know that we agreed we shouldn't, but what I'm asking isn't even about that. You're...a good friend, Sora, I won't...”
“Of course – I mean, if you aren't... If you don't,” Riku sighed, “like the idea of kissing me, I don't want you to feel that you have to. This all becomes moot and our professional relationship goes on, whether you're really part of my crew or not.”

“Why do you think I don't like kissing you?” Sora questioned, but Riku only shook his head. Hesitating, Sora reached for his hands. “I do want to. I feel... warmer than before, and safer. I want to kiss you just as much as I want to be part of your crew.”

“And I don't know if I really could officially make you part of my crew,” he muttered, kissing the back of Sora's hand, who was rather shocked at the effect that small gesture had on him. His cheeks went red, affection giving him that fluttery feeling in his gut again.

“So,” Riku hesitated, “maybe... So long as we don't know... And if we keep it discrete... We could have this. For however long it can last.”

Which would surely only be until he saw the Admiral, Riku reminded himself somberly. But, he would convince him to let Sora remain on board, in an official capacity.

He just... didn't know how else he would react. And if he suspected anything romantic was happening between them...

That was where he allowed his thoughts to end, letting Sora wind his arms up around his shoulders and meeting the kiss without any more fear.
Chapter 13

It only took one day to reach port. The wind favored them, a rare and welcome change, and Riku knew the route so well that he took the helm himself for most of the journey.

Only hours after the sun had set, The Highwind pulled into the Kingdom of Radiant Garden, and the relief from the crew was palpable. Even though they had all committed to their mission and were raring to see it accomplished, it felt like such a long time since any of them had been home. Every man from the highest rank to the cabin boys understood that this was no shore leave, that their business was just that; business.

Still, they would be home for at least two nights. Many of them might see their families before departing, and that boost to morale affected everyone. They had even been expressly allowed the night to return to their homes, if they so desired – it would save on coin and keep some of the port-side inn's rooms free, should any of them choose to rent the comfort of a bed for the night.

Everyone was indeed in high spirits... Save, perhaps, the Captain.

Riku had resolved everything necessary with the port authority, finished speaking with the innkeeper, and arranged for travel in the morning. Only he and a few officers (and Sora) would be needed at the palace, where he would meet with the Admiral and Her Royal Highness to discuss their progress and their plans.

He only had one night more with Sora, before something would change. Even knowing his father as well as he did – and Riku knew him better than anyone else could – he still did not know what change would come about, and whether it would be for the better or the worse.

He wasn't even so sure he'd be able to tell the two apart.

The remaining crew had left the ship at least long enough to unload some of their gold at the tavern. Riku took one quick detour to check on them, making sure they all understood that they represented the Kingdom's Navy and the Royal Family themselves, before approaching the only person who seemed out of place.

Sora kept to the wall, nursing a cup of ale that was clearly not to his taste. Without being employed by the staff or counted among the sailors, he didn't know exactly how to navigate the atmosphere; this place was considerably more tame than The Usual Spot, but he expected things might become more familiar as the night wore on, and just as uncomfortable. Sailors got handsy, loud, rude. It made him a little uneasy, and he didn't want to be around the tavern for too much longer. He just wasn't sure where else he was supposed to go.

Distracted by his concerns, he didn't notice Riku approach. His shoulder was tapped and he almost jumped, but instead a wide smile broke out over his face upon seeing who it was.

"I thought I lost you for a bit there," Sora grinned, and Riku basked in it.

"Of course I'd come looking for you," Riku took the goblet from him – Sora was quick to hand it off, confirming his disinterest in it – and set it gently on the nearest table. "Will you follow me?"

Without even thinking it over, Sora nodded and pulled himself away from the wall. "Where are we going? Or is that a secret?"

"Not necessarily," Riku cast a look towards the men, who were so deeply involved in their good
time that they hadn't noticed that their Captain hadn't simply left. Steering them towards the door, Riku's shoulder pressed to Sora's so he could be heard without lifting his voice. “We're going to an inn.”

Without even being certain why, a bit of a blush rose to Sora's cheeks. “I could use a rest in a real bed. One that doesn't rock back and forth all night,” he declared as they left, stretching his arms and finding one of Riku's sliding around him.

“Even when you're used to it, I've got to say... Dry land is a pretty novel experience,” Riku agreed.

“I just hope I can manage getting back on the ship after.”

“You will. You're pretty good, on a boat.”

Though only a little, Sora felt a prickle of something like smugness. “Well, I hadn't been on the sea in a while, before all this... But I practically grew up on it, back when we lived on the islands.”

“It shows.” The self-satisfaction wasn't lost on Riku, and the novelty of hearing Sora boast without a sword in his hand was...cute. “You can fight on a ship, many of my men took a lot longer figuring out how to walk.”

Sora beamed. “That's because I'm the best.”

“Nearly,” Riku corrected. “You don't have your own ship.”

“Maybe not yet.”

He said it with such confidence that Riku almost laughed, but instead his grin was fond. “... I'd like to see that.”

“Maybe one day... If I stick with you,” Sora nudged him with his shoulder. The atmosphere changed, a little, and even though it was a topic breached repeatedly, it seemed to be a conversation they were doomed to have until they knew something more.

“... I hope you do,” Riku said, because he simply couldn't not say it.

“I hope I get to,” Sora's smile faded. Riku wasn't the only one to think about it so much – Sora didn't remember ever thinking about anything so much, when it wasn't about Roxas.

And Roxas was the main reason why staying seemed impossible. If there was a chance that, once they found him, he'd also want to stay...

“You and your brother could work on my ship. Not necessarily under the Royal Family's employ, but under mine. They wouldn't disagree, if I vouched for you, and you've been a valuable source of information about the Never Was crew.”

Which he meant to bring up, tomorrow, anyway.

“Thank you, but that's not really what I'm worried about,” Sora looked despondent.

“What is it?”

Sora sighed heavily, a full-bodied drooping that Riku couldn't recall ever seeing him perform, if his memory served. “I don't think Roxas will want to stay, and I have to go where Roxas goes.”

He sounded so... Resigned. It was a little unnerving. “Why wouldn't he?”
“He doesn't like being cooped up, and I don't think he likes ships that much, either.” Sora glanced at him with affection, and admitted, “He wouldn't be your biggest fan.”

Riku could guess as to why that was, and he didn't think he could pretend to have no interest in Sora even for his brother's sake. “... And you'd have to go with him?”

Sora nodded. “We're two parts of the same person. We're hopeless without each other.”

“You don't seem hopeless, right now.”

“I don't know how to explain...” Sora bit his lip in thought. “I don't feel whole without him.”

In good conscience, Riku couldn't try to persuade Sora away from his brother... But in that moment, he desperately wanted to, anyway. Finding Roxas would be one more definite ending to the two of them, if tomorrow didn't accomplish that on its own.

“But...” Sora perked up a little, shrugging. “Who knows? Roxas has surprised me before. And you know I'll stay at least until we find him.”

Unless the Admiral ordered otherwise.

Riku stopped walking them down the roadside, diverting them towards the nearby shallow alley, but he was kissing Sora before they'd even reached the limited privacy it provided. Startled, Sora's first instinct was to jump slightly and cling to Riku's sleeves, but he only needed that moment before he was tilting his head to lean into the contact.

Riku just...had to stop imagining him gone. Sora relaxed against him, kissing him back in that somewhat shy manner that was equal parts inexperience and eagerness, and Riku started to forget about his fear again. Everything aside from Sora, in fact, mercifully slipped his mind.

The inn. Only the desire to move forward prompted Riku to pull away, muttering, “Shall we?”

“Yeah,” Sora seemed vaguely flustered, still getting used to the idea that he enjoyed kissing Riku so much. “Let's go.”

Slinking from the alley, it wasn't long before the inn loomed within sight, and Riku's thoughts had drifted right back where he wished they weren't.

“... No matter what happens, you'll always be welcome on my ship. You, and your brother.” It was important that he know, come what may, Riku told himself. Eventually, he would stop harping on it like a hopelessly clingy child. Aloud, if no other way.

Sora smiled warmly. “I'll always come back when I can. That's a promise.”

They both remembered the reality of the situation they'd discussed before – that coming across each other again would be unthinkable, maybe impossible. But... Riku thought, now, that he might go looking for Sora if it felt like he'd gone too long without seeing him. He'd tracked a ship across the seas; what made tracking one boy any harder?

Not to mention that something about that way Sora spoke, with such easy conviction, made Riku think that anything he said was possible.

“I'll hold you to that,” Riku's fingers laced with his, and Sora squeezed his hand in return. “The inn is just up there...”
Sora glanced up ahead, eyes alight. “Are the men staying here, too?”

“No,” Riku chuckled, picking up on some teasing in his tone. “I mean, they can choose to, if they want to pay out of their own pockets. I’ve only set aside one room.”

“So, it’s special treatment,” Sora concluded, a knowing amusement in his voice.

“No at all. This room is for me,” he looked almost nonchalant, until he smirked. “It just happens to be large enough for two people, with enough food for two people, and coincidentally you’re in the area... Yes, it’s special treatment.”

Caught off guard, Sora began to laugh. “You’re not very good at pretending.”

He would be, Riku thought grimly, but he didn’t have to be yet. “I can’t act as though I don’t like you.”

“I won’t ask you to,” Sora’s blush darkened. “Well, not when we’re alone.”

“Good, I definitely couldn’t do it when we’re on our own...”

“Me neither,” Sora smiled, and picked up his pace a little.

The innkeeper greeted them with a smile, and didn’t give their joined hands even a glance – whether he’d been paid for discretion or was simply accustomed to the tendencies of sailors, Sora didn’t know, nor was he sure how common it was to see men together on this side of the sea. Riku led them upstairs, unlocking the door to a large room with the windows flung open onto a view of the moonlit harbour, and a table laden with trays. Sora’s eyes widened; he couldn’t remember seeing so much food without it being meant for significantly more than two people, nor had he ever appreciated the view of the sea from a bedroom before.

They could see the docks, and The Highwind. The rolling breeze off the water gave the air a bite of salt, something he hadn’t even realized he’d started to associate with ‘home’. The bed, larger than any he’d ever slept in, bathed in welcoming lantern light.

“I didn’t really know what you’d like...” Riku closed the door, appraising his expression with subtle nervousness, but Sora didn’t notice.

“This is good,” he replied softly, entirely stunned. Satisfied, Riku locked the door and approached, tilting Sora’s chin just enough to kiss his cheek.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a proper meal,” Riku took him by the hand, again, awakening him into movement.

“I’ve never had a meal like this,” Sora started circling the table and lifting the covers off the trays, wide-eyed at the assortment available to them. Fresh lobster and roast chicken, soft bread, sauced vegetables he couldn’t identify but that were still letting off steam and a scent of mixed spices.

“You can have as much as you want,” Riku pulled out a chair for him before sitting opposite. “The rest will be ours to keep, too, for as long as it’ll last.”

He still seemed baffled – or perhaps overwhelmed – but began to load food onto his plate while Riku poured them both wine from a bottle dated sometime before Sora’s year of birth. Sora grinned – he vastly preferred wine to ale, if he had to have either - and accepted the glass thankfully.
“This must have cost a fortune,” he commented, lifting a fork full of the vegetables curiously to his mouth and finding the sauce pleasantly rich.

“How wasn’t anything I couldn’t afford,” Riku dismissed, beginning to eat as well. He waited until he’d swallowed and dabbed the corner of his mouth with a napkin before realizing that Sora’s eyes were on him. “Don’t think about it.”

“It’s just...” Sora swallowed another mouthful, disbelief not keeping him from clearing his plate, “a lot to spend on one person...”

“You’re worth more to me than money,” Riku shrugged. Sora’s fork clinked against the plate as it accidentally slipped from his fingers, and Riku quickly lifted his gaze. Sheepishly, he noted that Sora had sank a little into the plush seat, a deep blush on his face.

He was flustered. Endearing as he found it, that hadn’t been his intent.

“How much...?”

It wasn’t a demand, it sounded... tentative. As though Riku was trying to build up to something. His tone was composed, a little too much so, but rather than leading Sora to any kind of conclusion, he just felt all the more confused.

“I’m not sure,” he hesitated, honestly searching for an answer. “I just know I want to stay by your side, and keep doing things like this with you...”

Sora stared, blush burning brighter than the sun. Riku held his breath, but Sora was not capable of cruelty. He did not make him wait for an answer. Within a few seconds he was shaking his head, eyes bright.

His hand slid away from the wine glass. “... I think I am.”

He knew he was. He was just too afraid to say it. Even when he was being honest, Riku held back, but he prayed that Sora understood that there wasn’t actually any doubt in his mind.

He loved Sora. Desperately.

Sora got up from his seat, leaning over the table and extending a hand. Riku followed his wordless instruction, rising, and kissed him back.

The intensity was unexpected and irresistible, Riku trying to convey everything he couldn’t say, and
Sora attempting to get even closer despite the table in the way. Unknowingly, the hand bracing against the surface was getting close to the wine glass, until it tipped onto the tablecloth and splashed onto Riku.

“Oh, no -” Sora sprang back, going to right the glass, but Riku beat him to it.

“It's fine,” Riku fought a laugh.

“Still, letting it go to waste...” Sora lamented, noticing the considerable stain on his own sleeve and lifting it to his mouth to suck on it. Riku almost broke, a very undignified snort only just stifled.

“That's fine,” he soothed again, and beckoned Sora around the table. The sleeve didn't leave his mouth, even as he was pulled into Riku's lap and his other arm hastily wrapped around his shoulders to keep from losing his balance.

“...Forget about the wine,” Riku implored softly. “Or the money. I just want to be here with you, right now.”

Slowly, Sora lowered his sleeve. “...Okay.”

“Can I kiss you again?”

There was another cool breeze coming in from the window, but Sora was warm. “... You don't always have to ask, you know.”

Riku grinned, sitting up a bit to lock their lips. The wine was sweeter on his tongue than even it had been in the glass. Sora was making the stain worse, dampening Riku's shirt as well as his other arm wound around his shoulders, but that honestly wasn't a concern anymore. He just wanted to hold him tighter, fidgeting in his lap and responding to Riku's kiss with a tiny moan.

Both of his hands – strong, from swordfighting – were working up under his shirt, and Riku murmured, “Should take off the wet clothes...”

“Huh?” Sora had almost trapped them together, chest flush against Riku's out of want to be closer. The moment he processed what he'd said, though, he let out a laugh of, “Oh!” and drew back to strip off his shirt without a second's hesitation.

His muscles seemed a little more defined than the last time Riku had seen him, strengthened as he healed, worked and fought. Hands drifted distractedly up Sora's chest, now far more interested in this than undressing, but Sora wouldn't have that.

“Hang on,” his hands covered Riku's. “You said we should take the wet clothes off. That means yours, too.”

Riku paused. Unable to fault his logic, he let his hands slip away and unbuttoned the collar, jacket long since removed from when he first came up to rent the room. Sora gently coaxed the shirt over his head and smoothed Riku's hair reverently.

Catching each other's eyes, Sora grinned somewhat lopsidedly. He was nervous, taking in the way Riku was staring, but... It was in a sort of excited way. Letting his own gaze drop to Riku's chest helped that buzz of anticipation grow; his shoulders were broader across, arms defined...

Quiet, like he wasn't sure whether or not he was overstepping, Riku said, “I'm still in wine-stained clothing... Should I take those off, too?”
Sora's face felt hot. “Probably... Shouldn't be in any wet clothes...”

“Help me take them off...?”

He was being so careful, or at least trying to, offering Sora as many chances to say no as he could. Still, he showed no discomfort or reluctance. Nodding a little, Sora scooted back a bit, taking most of the pressure off of his lap to begin unlacing his pants.

Riku ran a hand through his own hair, and exhaled slowly. No reluctance at all.

Laces pulled loose, Riku's pants became slack enough to slide down, and Sora quickly glanced up at him. He promptly lifted his hips, shifting to allow it, and swallowed.

“I'd like yours off, too...”

Sora bit his lip, but again, it didn't seem as though it was in hesitation. “Should we, um, should we move, then?”

“To the bed,” Riku nodded, and as he stood, he stepped out of the remainder of his clothing. Sora automatically averted his eyes before he remembered that the point was to look. He turned around, backing towards the bed and settling on the edge of the mattress. He expected Riku to join him, even climb over him, but instead he approached and went for the laces of Sora's own breeches. Watching his hands, he leaned on his own and allowed their removal.

Light played over Riku's hair, bringing out the silver shine, and cast shadows that deeply defined every part of his body. Sora had seen men of all sorts naked, before, passed out at the tavern or bathing in the sun...

But seeing Riku like this... For all the strength he displayed, there was an obvious vulnerability. It felt all the more intimate... And he looked all the more handsome, though the thought made Sora feel like burying his face.

He was just as nude, now, and Riku was looking him over with the exact same expression Sora had. Like he couldn't believe how any person could look so perfect. Again, it seemed he was just going to descend on Sora, touch or taste as he was so strongly tempted, but Riku exhaled and stopped himself.

“I can touch you?” he verified carefully.

Sora sat up, catching his jaw in both hands and kissing him quickly before he answered. “You can.”

Riku immediately wanted more of his mouth, reclaiming it and coming closer. His hands slid over Sora's thighs and ascended, making Sora's breath hitch – he was getting closer to touching -

“Wait-...”

Once more, Riku balked, breaking the kiss just as he was about to graze Sora's most intimate place.

“What is it...?” Sora sat back to see him properly, confusion writ all over his face.

“I want you. To have you.” Riku had to make it clear, he had to make sure – he wanted this, more than anything he wanted him while it was right and before it was too late and he could never consider it again... But if Sora didn't want him just as much - “But if you don't want to, or you're not ready... We won't.”
If there was even a pause, Riku would have drawn away. Sora grabbed his hand, though, meeting his eyes without a trace of shame.

“I want to try... I want you to show me.”

Riku swallowed, throat suddenly dry. Very lightly, very slowly, he wrapped a hand around Sora's growing cock. He had, admittedly, prepared in the event this was going to happen – there was oil on the bedside table, innocently available. “I won't ask again... If you change your mind-”

“It'll be okay if I say so?” Sora finished for him.

He nodded. “This only goes as far as you want it,” he promised, and ran his hand up to the tip and down again. Sora's breath caught.

“Mn...”

The reassurances were sweet, and he definitely wasn't opposed to this part, the soft touch making his entire body tingle as he hardened in Riku's hand. Sora reached out to brush silver hair aside, wanting to get a better look at his face, and Riku tilted his face up slightly.

It was like seeing him for the first time. Awed, Sora breathed, “Y-you're really...”

At last, Riku was moving over him, straddling his thighs as his hand ran over his length steadily. “Hm...?”

“I don't know what word you use instead of 'pretty', for a man...” Sora sounded apologetic, but Riku grinned.

“From you, I'll take 'pretty' as a compliment.”

Sora laughed quietly, until it became a moan. Riku's thumb had run just under the sensitive crown, and he reddened all over again, unconsciously baring his throat to let Riku dapple kisses over his heartbeat.

“I don't think I've ever wanted anyone the way I want you,” Riku confessed, lips against Sora's pulse and hand still, allowing Sora to press up into it with a groan. He hadn't known skin could be so sensitive, especially just behind his ear – Sora wanted to keep him close and let Riku explore all he wished, and he was inexplicably certain it would be easier if they were both lying down. Sora's hands drifted up through his hair and pulled Riku down with him.

Riku's lips were forced away from the hollow behind his jaw, but he was suddenly all too eager to leave that spot. He worked his way lower, hand drifting away after he'd worked Sora to full hardness, and the legs flanking him spread apart. Almost immediately they twitched inward, Sora's embarrassment catching up with him, but they were easy to coax back apart.

He still wanted this. Riku softly traced his tongue from the base to the tip of his shaft, and Sora shivered at the foreign feeling.

“Riku -” Sora covered his face with one hand, feeling too exposed otherwise as he focused on keeping his legs right where they were. Riku's lips were parting around the tip and there was a strong rush of heat as he sucked – Sora's response was immediate and loud, unable to help himself when that sweet tongue swirled around tentatively.

He was taking more of him into the heat of his mouth, and Sora couldn't seem to stop shaking. God, everything he was doing felt amazing – blissful and warm and so embarrassing, but it was too good
to let that get in the way of anything. The hand not covering his red face found Riku's hair, running through the tresses as easily as though they were water.

Compromising with himself, Riku drew back but kept his lips pressed to him, not wanting to stop. “There's a vial of oil beside you... Can I have it?”

Sora hardly heard him over his own heightened breathing. “What...?”

Riku almost smiled, and drew away from his cock to press a kiss to the hollow of his hip. “The oil next to you.”

It wasn't easy to see Riku as much as Sora wished he could, but he was having a hard time looking away nonetheless. “Right,” he breathed, twisting to grab the vial and pushing himself up to hand it to Riku.

He had only a vague idea of what it would be used for, and he wasn't familiar with how men might make the process easier. Hesitating, he bit his lip. “Um, Riku...?”

Riku had been curbing the impulse to ask once more whether or not it was okay to proceed, keeping the vial in-hand. “Yes?”

“Y-you know I've never done this sort of thing. So I don't really know...any of it...” Sora looked away, at one of the walls.

“I'll go slow, if you still want me to.”

“I just want to understand,” he shook his head a little, not wanting to stop. “That's all...”

As it dawned on Riku what he was really asking and why, he reddened faintly and explained. “I want to use my fingers to stretch you out... It won't hurt, if I use this and go slowly.” He indicated the oil. “It might be strange, or uncomfortable at times... But I want you to tell me if it's too much.”

Truth be told, Sora was somewhat distracted by the blush, but he relaxed. “Oh.. That's alright, then. I trust you.”

In this situation, hearing those words felt more foreign than they ever should. Still, Riku nodded and uncapped the vial, beginning to run the oil between his fingers liberally and rubbing them together to get them coated. “I'll be careful.”

Sitting up, Sora slid his arms loosely around Riku's shoulders and kept his legs apart. Just lying there and waiting felt too awkward; he wanted to cuddle up against him, get their former closeness back.

“Have you done this before...?” He watched Riku close up the vial again with one hand.

He nodded, hesitating briefly. “… Mostly from the other side.”

“Ohh – ngh...”

That actually made Sora feel better, and made the strangeness of his intruding finger easier to take. The oil made it an easy slide through the ring of muscle, but it was undeniably different. The idea that Riku knew what this felt like, though... It was reassuring. He would know what could make this bad, or good.

“Try to stay relaxed,” Riku kissed his temple, curling his finger slowly. Sora clung onto him tighter to compensate for his efforts, breathing slow and managing not to get any tighter around him... And
making it all the easier to find that spot.

Sora had no idea what to expect, but the sensitive bolt of warmth that came with the pressure made him moan sharply, needy, wanting that again immediately and trying to grind down into Riku's hand to get him to do it again. He needn't have tried; Riku knew exactly what he'd found, and rubbed against the sweet spot with deliberate care.

“Riku...”

“Is that okay?” He could guess as much, now, but he wanted to hear Sora say it... He was teasing him open, hyper-aware of how much Sora could take.

“It feels nice... It's...*mgh...*” Sora's voice broke, the stretch of a second finger unexpected and not nearly as uncomfortable as he would have thought. Riku was going slow, focused on that angle that made all the difference, and he was so warm. Suddenly, Sora was inclined to kiss an eager trail along the smooth expanse of his neck, and he all but attached himself there by the lips.

“Sora...” Riku tilted his head, pleasantly surprised, and briefly closed his eyes. He was moving and rotating his fingers methodically, letting Sora adjust to the slow stretch. All awkwardness was gone, Sora's kisses raining down on him adoringly, allowing Riku to move and catch his lips just once – he almost got the corner instead, Sora was sliding his legs to open to him wider, moaning a bit too loud for their proximity but Riku revelled in it -

They managed to connect the kiss, and Riku was getting caught up in it, starting to work the third finger in shallowly. He broke the kiss then, just in case Sora needed to protest, which he would not do but still had questions.

“*Mgh... Nn, Riku...?*”

“Yes...” he breathed, and almost went still. “Are you okay?”

“I'm okay,” Sora said immediately, eyes wide with some confusion but his pupils were blown, the narrow ring of his irises all the bluer. “Just... How much more are you going to...?”

“Just this one more, just to get you ready for...”

“O-okay,” flushed pink and curious, Sora kissed him again briefly. “I understand. But, could you move them...um, back where they were?”

Riku almost grinned, and pressed all three gradually inside to curl against his prostate. “Like this?”

“Yes...” Sora's hips twitched, head lolling back, hands gripping Riku strongly.

“I love that...” The fingers circled that spot, and thrust gently. “The way you react...”

Sora breathed his name and tilted his jaw up to the kisses Riku was giving it. He wanted to be closer than this, as close as two people could possibly get, for every time he hit that spot, Sora felt like he'd been lit aglow. Riku was involved in making him feel good, now, stretching him no longer quite so high on his priority list. It took Sora some time to find reality again, to remember that he was taking without giving.

“Mnn... Aren't you... Don't you want?”

It was like Riku had forgotten. “Yes,” he nipped his throat, very lightly. “Could you take it?”
“I think so, but you'd know better than me…”

“It’s your body,” Riku shook his head. “It’s hard to know the first time, but I still want you gauge for yourself…”

That was too nerve-wracking to process. Sora swallowed hard, drawing himself up enough to meet Riku's eyes. “Let's try,” he decided breathlessly. “If it's too much, I'll tell you to stop.”

“I don't want to hurt you,” Riku nodded, reiterating, and his fingers slowly slipped out one at a time. Sora's breath caught; having them gone actually felt more off than having them there, and he already missed the wonderful electric feeling that he was so good at eliciting.

As he uncorked the vial again, Sora's back met the blankets and he watched Riku pool the oil in his hand. Very briefly, Sora let his gaze drop to Riku running it over his erection, slicking the entire thing, but his eyes went right back up to Riku's face with a very soft squeak.

“Whoa-...”

Riku had lifted Sora's hips, bringing his legs up at the same time, and he leaned over to kiss him softly. Sora's eyes closed, and let it relax him. Riku began to press himself inside, and there was no pain – just pressure, and a distinct difference.

It felt more like they were connected.

He was going slow, giving Sora plenty of time to tell him to stop. “Alright?” he murmured, lips only hovering above his. Sora wanted to kiss him more, harder, deeper, not knowing how else to deal with the intense burst of energy he couldn’t identify – it could have been nervousness, but Sora wasn't able to put any name to it at all.

“Mm-hm,” he reached for Riku's shoulders, pulling him down a little, and the two of them were flush against each other. Sora was wrapped around him – legs around his waist, and taking him to the very hilt of his cock. Riku didn't move; he wanted Sora to adjust.

Every exhale was an almost-moan, delicate and shaky. It could have been pain, and Riku started to fear it was.

“Does it hurt? We can stop if it's too much.”

“It doesn't hurt,” Sora breathed, and his hands drifted through Riku's hair. Immediately, some of the remaining tension left him. “I don't wanna stop.”

Sora looked up at him, imploring, and Riku believed him. With all the care he was capable of, Riku drew himself back just a little, and began to move.

“Mmm…” The sensation was a gentle drag, a peculiarly satisfying tease. They were kissing again, and the affection washed over Sora like a tidal wave – if he hadn't wanted to keep going so badly, he would have stopped just to hold him.

This just felt right. Overwhelming, but right.

Riku's thrusts were shallow and slow, to start, but it was still more intense than anything he'd ever experienced. From either side of sex, it had never been this hot, this dizzying, in such a good way – Sora was starting to squirm a little, wanting to feel more without knowing how to go about it, but experience wasn't what was making this perfect.
It just was.

“Keep still... Here, let me...” Riku shifted, bringing the angle of Sora's hips a little higher.

“It's sort of -” Sora almost protested, feeling as though his arousal was on full display, but it only mattered for a split second before he forgot why he would ever care. Riku could press against his prostate again from his angle, and Sora's entire body went hot.

Riku grinned, Sora's moan strikingly loud, and it took another summoning of his self-control to still go slow. He hit that spot again, and again, and murmured, “You look...so good, like this...”

Sora's eyes were hazy, but he smiled back.

They moved together more seamlessly. Riku was still gentle, but started to move faster, responding to the way Sora's moans became breathier and less restrained. The pace built gradually, Sora's whimpers became mewls and cries, the rest of the world ceased to matter or even exist.

“Mmn, Riku -” Sora moaned, searching for something to hold onto. Riku noticed immediately, and his hand was guided towards the headboard to wrap clumsily around the wood. “Ah... Can I... Kiss you again?”

It felt bizarre, the change in the angle as Riku swooped low to kiss him in answer, but his thrusts were deeper and Sora found himself loving that, too. They wrapped around each other, spiraling towards a point where they'd both snap – Sora forgot the words and how to ask, tried to press himself into Riku's hands, and he got the message. His attempts to breathe dissolved into panting, gripping the headboard harder, his cock hot to the touch and leaking steadily over Riku's hand as he stroked him.

“Hn-ahh!” Sora spasmed. Riku's name followed his cry but he was deaf to his own loud voice, oblivious to anything but the blinding orgasm flooding every part of his body – he may have said more, done more, but he couldn't even remember his own name in the seconds that followed. Riku never stopped moving throughout, slowing and pulling himself out to stroke himself to completion with a shudder.

“Sora-...” Riku clutched at him, burying his face in Sora's neck, and spilled between them. He was trembling, pleasure leaving him wonderfully weak, and Sora was in no better state.

Limp against the bed, Sora only bothered to drag his eyes open to watch him warmly, feel through Riku's hair, and gently hold him against his neck.

Riku's breathing was slow, relaxed. He didn't think he'd ever seen Riku so calm. A smile started to tug at his swollen lips, brushing silky strands out with his fingers and playing with them.

When Riku spoke, it was almost incomprehensible, lazy and content. “We'll need to bring more of that oil with us.”

Sora was almost shocked to learn that he was still capable of blushing, a bit of laughter bubbling up in his chest. “It's a long time between ports...”

“We'll bring plenty,” Riku nuzzled him. “If you're up for it.”

Unbridled, Sora started to grin. “I could do that again.”

“Gives me an excuse to get you to sleep in my cabin,” Riku said decisively, as though it were settled. Sense had returned to Sora just enough to see the fault with that.
“Shouldn't I stay with the crew, though?” He bit his lip.

“Be my favorite,” Riku lifted his head a little. “Be my first mate. I don't have an official second-in-command.”

The prospect woke him from his foggy state of afterglow. “Don't I have to...prove myself, somehow, to earn that?”

“You fight better than any of them.”

Shamelessly, he had to agree. “That's true.”

“So,” Riku sat up a bit, grinning at him. Just for now, it all seemed possible. The rest of the world hadn't come back into being, yet. He didn't think it would even matter if the Admiral were right outside their window, full of expectations and refusals. No one could deny Riku anything; no one but Sora. “Be my second-in-command and sleep in my cabin and kiss me again.”

Sora smiled wide, and denied Riku none of that.
“I'm the man before the mast, that ploughs the raging sea... And on this simple subject, will you please enlighten me... Common pirates, we are called, come tell me the reason why... And on this simple subject, I'll reply.”

Roxas didn't often sing, anymore. His voice often drew unwanted attention or commentary, and he had a great disliking for it regardless of whatever reaction it drew from anyone. Singing was not an enjoyable way to pass the time or a means to lighten the burden of a task. Still, it kept his teeth from clacking together quite so much as he scrubbed salt from the deck on hands and knees.

He'd rolled the sleeves of his new shirt up high and pushed up his trousers in a similar manner, trying to avoid slopping water on himself any more than could be helped. It was a cold night, and he didn't need to be soaked in addition. The sea, mercifully, had deigned to be calm tonight and the gentle, constant rocking of the deck wasn't enough to upset his bucket of equally chilly water.

If there was a silver lining to his cooperation with the cut-throats so far, it was that he'd at least (and at last) been given some proper garments. They were only whatever was handy and hadn't been claimed by someone else, but they were still clothes of Roxas's own. Once he was done with this, he'd actually have the means to regain some warmth.

A definite trade-off, for his labor this far. The work, though, was not at all to his liking.

He was either being pushed into training to further develop his powers – and it was nearly always violent, particularly days like this one in which he'd been sent off to suffer at Larxene's hands – or forced to do the gritty manual labor no one else was keen on. At the bottom of the barrel, there were only two ways to go about receiving a task; do it, or be whipped for saying no.

Maliciously, he slammed the brush down and scoured a rough spot, replacing some words of the shanty with a choice few of his own. His voice carried over the empty deck, but he wasn't aware of it; his singing was quiet, surely overtaken by the whistle of wind and the sounds of his work.

Those things certainly covered Axel's footfalls, but not his whistle, joining the tune of Roxas's bitter version. That was an announcement of his presence, so he'd have it no other way.

“Oh,” Roxas looked up sharply, halfway to his feet already. “It's you.”

“You've got a lovely singing voice, you know that?” Axel swaggered towards him, appreciating the vision of Roxas on his knees while it was still in front of him. It had been ages since he'd been allowed to even exchange words with him, much less get a moment alone – he thanked his restlessness, the last few hours of sleepless obsessing having clearly been fate at work.

If he believed in fate, anyway. If such a thing led him through life at all, it must have concluded this
It was quite a lot of stress. Axel was only human, or something almost like it.

“So I’ve been told,” Roxas held onto the long brush, regarding Axel without any indication that he might have missed him. That was alright – he’d expected that. Clearly, he hadn’t been flattered by his comment.

“I’d bet you sound prettier when your teeth aren’t chattering.”

“Not much I can do about that,” Roxas’s mouth remained a straight line, but his bright eyes glowered. “I'm wet and freezing up here.”

“You forget...” Lifting a hand, Axel created fire at his fingertips. Roxas couldn't do anything about it, but he could.

Roxas stiffened. With Axel, he couldn’t tell what was a threat, and what was a suggestion. “… What are you offering?” He stood his ground, watching the fire but making no move either away or towards him.

“I steal you for a little while and warm you up,” Axel’s eyebrows quirked. “You can choose the method.”

Of course; he should have figured that was actually his aim. In all truthfulness, Roxas found that to be one of the most likable things about him – Roxas knew desire. It was the most exploitable thing in the world.

“I could be whipped for shirking my duties to consort with you,” he toyed with the brush, glancing from it to Axel with his eyelashes lowered and a barely-visible grin. “What makes it worth it?”

“Aside from warmth and comfort? The pleasure of my company?”

Roxas bit his tongue briefly, burying a smirk. “You're going to have to sweeten it a bit more than that.”

Axel played dumb. “I'll take the blame,” he offered – genuinely, since he knew he could take even the worst of whippings. Perhaps Xemnas would let Saix do it, and he'd work out some of the aggression now constantly between them.

“There's nothing else you could be persuaded to part with?” Roxas coaxed, and Axel smirked.

“Nothing gold.”

The smile promptly vanished and became a scowl. “If you're trying to tempt me to rob you, it's going well.”

“You know you're always welcome to try.” Axel came towards him and brought the flame with him, giving them a little more light to see by and the barest suggestion of warmth to Roxas's face. “If you really wanted to avoid going to the effort, though, you could always entice me. Taking off your clothes worked well, the first time.”

Almost an ingrained response, Roxas narrowed his eyes, but the possibility of gold was a little intriguing. Still, the last thing he'd ever want Axel to think was that it was that easy. “I just got these
“clothes.”

“So removing them will be a brand new experience.”

He looked from the fire to Axel's face. Taking off his things might at least give them a chance to dry off. “… I'll go down with you,” he yielded, “but that's not a promise of a personal show.”

“You say that now…” Axel turned away, confident that he wouldn't be far behind. Roxas dropped the brush by the wooden bucket, letting it clatter, and wrapped his free arms around himself. He huddled as he walked, finding that Axel had dissolved the fire the moment he stepped down below deck and waited for him right at the bottom.

Axel's arm wrapped around his shoulders, radiating heat from every pore. Roxas allowed it, walking in silence for a few moments.

“... They rarely pair me with you, to use my...powers.”

He thought he might keep quiet the whole way there, but Roxas actually did have a few things to say.

“They don't trust me to keep focused,” Axel responded indifferently.

“There is a cause for that, then.” Surprisingly, Roxas grinned, and Axel matched it.

“Take it as a good sign. It means they think they might want to keep you around, and not just until I get bored of you. They don't think our whirlwind romance will last.”

“Good, I wouldn't want them to. Especially if you keep calling it that.”

“Don't say what we have isn't special,” Axel whirled Roxas around and pressed him against the wall, stopping them in their tracks. Roxas didn't break eye contact, staring with some degree of wariness.

He didn't think they'd just stop. He didn't think he'd find himself in such a potentially vulnerable position, so quickly. Axel... Maybe he wasn't quite like the others, but that didn't make him good. That didn't mean he could be trusted. For every moment that Roxas might have entertained the notion that he might be, he had to redouble his efforts to remember the truth.

Axel pressed closer, murmuring, “Warmer?”

And Roxas reminded himself of it again.

“Yes, but still not warm, really,” he told him, quiet.

“You know what would help that is a lack of clothing.”

“I'm not sure I'm convinced.”

Without much in the way of warning, Axel's blazing hot hands slid underneath the hem of his shirt, and the both of them hissed.

“Damn, you are cold...”

“You're burning,” Roxas inhaled, but the way they seared wasn't...painful, exactly. They were too much, far too much on the frozen skin of his stomach, but it shot right through him and left a wide swath of sensation in their wake.
“Too much?” Axel didn't remove them, right away.

“No, it's good. It'll get used to it.”

“So are you convinced, yet...?” The hands etched up a little higher, and Roxas could have melted.

“More convinced than I was,” Roxas didn't want to let it show how close he was to agreeing to it all. “But you should keep convincing me in private.”

Axel withdrew...reluctantly. “Let's go. My room.”

“Mm,” Roxas drew away from the wall, and found himself almost pinned to Axel's side again by his arm. It might have annoyed him, if it weren't for the fact that he was even less willing to deal with the cold, now. It was certainly better below deck then up with the wind, but there was still more to be desired.

“You know,” Axel spoke lowly, in a manner far too conversational to actually be conversational, “they wouldn't work you so hard if you just...embraced our way of things.”

Bitterly, Roxas thought he'd cooperated as much as he'd ever mean to. “I don't believe the Captain would trust me if I did.”

“He might start trusting you a little faster.”

“And what part of your ways would you like me to warm to?” Roxas almost snapped.

“The pillaging. The thieving,” Axel suggested, though Roxas mercifully hadn't encountered either of those situations yet. He knew it was a matter of time. However, Axel continued, “Using your powers to ruin those who try to stop us.”

“Townspeople and tavern patrons, for example?” he sniped.

“And the Navy.”

Roxas paused. He hadn't been included in any discussions or told about anything happening as of late; the pursuit they'd evaded hadn't been brought to his attention, and the fact that Larxene and Xaldin had been working in conjunction just yesterday hadn't clued him in to anything very different than the norm. In truth, he hadn't seen enough of the storm to think it anything more than the two of them amusing themselves, for what else was there to do when one wielded inhuman power than abuse it?

“... Well, I don't know anyone in the Navy...” Roxas frowned, and wondered why Axel would be bringing this up now.

“You may meet them. If they ever catch up,” Axel snorted, unlocking the door to his cabin. Roxas had scarcely noticed they'd arrived.

“Have they ever caught you?”

“We allowed them to catch up, once. To send a message.”

The two of them entered the familiar bedroom, which was strangely more comfortable than Roxas remembered it being. He may have even relaxed, were their topic of conversation not so off-putting.

“... What was the message?”
“That they were better off not trying to stop us,” Axel shut the door, and watched Roxas for a reaction. “We killed most of them.”

Roxas's eyes went downcast as he mulled that over. He hadn't expected anything different, but... “I could kill a man who meant to kill me, or my brother. Could even understand killing a man who stole from me, or had done some other unforgivable crime... But someone who'd never done wrong by me, someone who ran... I couldn't do it.” He tilted his head slightly, shaking it. “Steal from them, sure, but kill them?”

“They do mean to kill us,” Axel slowly went to sit on his bed. “We're past 'imprisonment', we've been at this too long.”

Roxas sank against the wall. “... I guess I have, too, by association.”

“They'll think you one of us and kill you, too,” he shrugged. It seemed he was trapped. If ships were after them, and caught up... They'd aim to kill, and Roxas would have no choice. “... I'll do what needs to be done to keep myself alive,” he sighed, resentful that he was even in such a position. “At least until I find Sora.”

“And what if you never do?”

He shrugged. “Keep going until someone kills me.”

“No wonder you manipulate light. You're a real ray of sunshine,” Axel dryly commented. Roxas gave him a look so piercing that it could have been a physical attack, and he purred. “See, for all your talk... I think the violence might thrill you, after a while.”

“It obviously thrills you,” Roxas retorted. “You thrill me. Particularly when you're wearing less.”

It was seamless, the way Axel swayed from one side of the line he walked to the other. One moment, cruel monster. The other, a slave to his lust like any other man. Despite himself - and wondering if he was losing his mind, in doing so - Roxas smirked.

“If nothing else...” he straightened up from the wall, slipping his leather vest off one shoulder, “playing this game with you has been entertaining.”

With unabashed interest, Axel watched the slip of clothing. “I hope I do more than entertain...”

The loose garment only needed a slight shrug to fall off him and heavily onto the floor. Roxas approached him, realizing that the dim light of Axel's lantern wasn't positioned to illuminate his face. “… Your eyes still glow, in light like this...”

Axel grinned and sat back a little. “So do yours.”

That caught Roxas by surprise, and he hesitated. “Do they...?”

“A little. They're beautiful.”

He looked away, blush climbing to his cheeks, and he hoped it wasn't noticeable. “They must have come with it. Someone would have noticed before now...”

“They didn't when we first met,” Axel's own luminous eyes followed his every move. Roxas was starting to walk a slow and aimless-seeming path around the bed. “I think I like them better, this
way."

“High praise.”

Axel watched him another second, then intercepted his path with one arm catching Roxas's waist. Roxas frowned; he'd been caught before reaching the chest he knew to contain Axel's treasures.

“... You're still wearing too much,” Axel muttered, rather than accuse him.

“Give me a little credit. I wouldn't get far if I robbed you now,” Roxas leaned in a bit closer. “I wasn't finished.”

Axel's gaze was still sharp, but he let him go. “Good.”

He supposed he couldn't blame Axel for his mistrust, Roxas conceded, drifting his hand over the surface of the chest. He wouldn't address it again unless forced to. “I remember an offer... That the next time I entered your bed, it would be on gold coins.” His eyes flickered up from the wood and iron, and met Axel's.

Some would undoubtedly go missing in the process, but now that he'd mentioned it, Axel didn't think he cared so much about that inevitability. “That could still be arranged.”

Roxas almost purred. “Then let's say we call that fair return for a free show.”

'Free' was certainly a relative concept. Axel could have laughed, but the prospect... And the obvious, honest interest Roxas now showed... “I'd like to see that, first,” he scanned the full length of his body, and savored his position of power.

Grasping the laces of his shirt, Roxas didn't break eye contact as he pulled it slowly open, the fabric parting over his collarbone like clouds revealing the sun. “Will you open it for me?” Roxas requested, only looking away to indicate the chest.

Axel nodded, still intent on Roxas, and reached into his own shirt collar. From there he removed a key on a long, thin chain, and Roxas made an immediate note of that. He hadn't been wearing that last time -

Of course, Axel would have expected him to commit the location to memory. He must move it regularly, Roxas concluded. That was no matter. If, or when, he stole from Axel, that time wouldn't come for a little while.

Now, the only thing keeping the billowy shirt on him was the belt at his waist. The collar of it draped over his shoulders, undone completely, and revealing a generous view of his torso as Axel unlocked his trunk and pulled it open. It was brimming oh-so-alluringly – he thought that it might've been fuller than the last time he got a glimpse, but he didn't know how he would have come to have more treasure in his possession. He lifted one leg to rest his boot against the lip of the chest, scooping up a few coins.

“You are good at what you do,” Axel took in every bit of bare skin he was being shown, tempted to skim his lips along the visible bit of leg.

Roxas just grinned, running coins admiringly through his fingers before slipping a couple into his open shirt.

“I hope you don't think I won't go after those.”
“I plan on it.” Wickedly, Roxas punctuated his declaration by dropping more coins under his belt. Axel growled, pulling him forward abruptly by his hips and knocking the breath out of him.

For a second, he feared he'd pushed too far.

Axel all but dragged Roxas to him, pressing his mouth to the bare part of his chest and devouring without teeth. Roxas was relieved, guessing he hadn't crossed any lines, but the brief thrill of fear had been strangely arousing in spite of that – Axel's hands were sliding down, not lingering anywhere, and surely his promise to warm Roxas was being acted upon now.

He was doing a good job of it, too. Roxas's hands drifted up and down Axel's arms briefly before going to his belt, not letting himself forget his striptease. To his slight dismay, Axel scarcely waited a second before thrusting a hand down below his belt line, feeling for the coins.

They were heavy spots of warming metal against his bare skin, the slight coolness to them more welcome than any other cold would ever be, and he wished he wouldn't take them back so quickly... But Axel had either gotten distracted by his cock, or that had been his target to begin with. His hot hand wrapped around the shaft, massaging a soft moan out of him.

Axel's kisses were working their way higher. “You gonna drop the pants?”

“Just a moment,” Roxas pushed at him to prompt him back, catching his breath and sliding slowly to one knee on the floor before him. The gold he'd dropped down his shirt fell heavily around it, the sound of clinking stirring up the heat growing in his gut.

His eyes never left Axel's as he removed one of his boots, then the other, deftly working open buckles without missing a single beat. Those hands kept busy, dropping his boots aside and then sitting up higher to untie the laces of his own trousers.

It was such a tease to watch him, and so delightfully interesting. Axel's hands ran through his hair, with a murmur of, “Can't seem to keep my hands off gold, either...”

For want of bare skin to press his lips to but finding none, all Roxas could do was inhale slowly and suck briefly on his lower lip. As his pants descended over his hips, all the gold in his shirt slipped out at last and hit the floor loudly, spinning off and rolling short distances away.

It was beyond him, why Axel's erection twitched in response to the noise. Maybe it was because he knew it was affecting Roxas, and he wanted to see him dizzy with need.

“I'd cover you in riches, if I were allowed...”

Roxas could feel heat pumping away within, like a heartbeat. “Perhaps one day you will be,” he leaned in, tugging Axel's shirt with his teeth until he got the hint to start removing it.

“We'll see,” Axel abandoned the garment, tempted to just set it on fire to get it well out of his way. Without the fire, though, Roxas thought he made for an intriguing picture. Worth rewarding, definitely.

He stood, dragging his pants the rest of the way down until they were falling off of him, left only in a shirt that covered very little. Axel reached out – for him, Roxas thought, but was proven only partially correct.

Axel grabbed blindly into the open chest, and upended an enormous sack of gold coins onto the bed around him.
Roxas's breathing picked up.

The lantern light reflected off every piece, their combined glimmer seeming to meld together and make the room even brighter with a golden glow. It was mesmerizing.

The purse was dropped, empty, and Axel pulled Roxas right over his lap. His legs instinctively parted to straddle his waist, still hungrily looking over his shoulder at the bed of coins Axel had created, until his world was overturned. Axel pressed Roxas to the bed, lips hovering just above his.

“Warmer, yet?”

“Mm... Warm enough.” Roxas almost groaned, the chill of the gold anything but a deterrent. The feel of it under him, distinct in both hardness and softness, made him feel more malleable, more sensitive.

He didn't feel like a person anymore, but that had been the case for so long he couldn't fathom how that might be a bad thing. This was worlds away, anyway – this didn't feel empty or lacking, this felt indulgent and wanton and good.

Roxas's hands were guided up into Axel's hair, getting a grip there as Axel shifted down to kneel off the side of the bed. He tangled coins up in the covers on the way, spilling them through Axel's hair and over his back almost by accident, and Roxas sat up a little when he realized what was happening.

“Oh,” he exhaled heavily, watching Axel settle between his legs and keeping still while his thighs were kissed, one at a time.

Gold glinted all around him, and Axel's mouth was so warm... For a second, Roxas was jarringly convinced he would come, before he'd even really had a chance to experience this.

Axel kissed the tip of his cock with an open mouth, and he was right there on the brink, forced to collect himself rapidly.

“Hm... If we don't want you being caught shirking your duties, maybe I should gag you, first...”

Roxas felt a harsh jab from reality, and came back to himself. “... Is that a joke?”

“No. But,” Axel smirked, “I also don't have a gag.”

Roxas relaxed. “Then perhaps you should use your mouth for something besides saying foolish things.”

“You've convinced me.”

All thought was wiped from Roxas's head, for a moment, and he made a choked sound as Axel licked from the base of his cock to the tip. He dragged hot, filthy kisses along the shaft, tending to every hard inch – he wouldn't take him into his mouth properly, yet, Axel wanted to see how needy he could rile him up to be. If Roxas had thought he was doing it to withhold pleasure, he might have protested, but as it was... His teasing was driving him delirious, blissfully so.

He would have closed his eyes, but the view was a large part of the current appeal. Especially as Axel skimmed one hand over the coins, picking up a few in the process, and lifted it to spill them down Roxas's chest.

“A-ah...”
They were cold but they almost seared him. Roxas's back arched, hands tightening in Axel's hair to pull him more urgently into his lap. Axel resisted, and smirked.

That was unfair – he needed...

Axel snickered, but at another sharp pull, his eyes closed and he hissed. “Careful...”

If Roxas had considered it, he would have wondered why Axel's protest had sounded more like encouragement, and why his warning had almost been a purr. “Then give me -”

“What?” Axel's eyes gleamed. “Something more along these lines?”

He parted his lips over the head, and sucked hard. Roxas's voice left him, momentarily, inhale sharp and relieved.

“There's something you want for this, isn't there?” he shuddered, but – dangerously – he thought he might actually give in to whatever Axel tried to persuade him into doing.

Axel was pulling back already, a display of cruelty. “What more could I want, aside from this?” Too gently, he kissed the leaking slit, and licked the bead of salt from his lips. “Could you get yourself to climax, just with gold?”

“I'd be interested to try,” Roxas's hips bucked, a little, and thought that he wouldn't protest any more teasing if he was indeed just left to the gold.

“Maybe some other time. I actually do want to use this,” Axel stroked his cock once, and then took him into his mouth.

“Mu-uch better...” Roxas shuddered, his hips arching up and hands sliding from his hair to frame his face. Axel didn't force his hips back down, he just hummed and began to move his head, eliciting a blissful groan. Roxas's fingers traced his jawline, the nails digging in at his neck.

He thought he should tell Axel to stop, when his tongue traced around the head and he was swallowed to the very hilt. It took him a second to muster the will, and what came out first was a short, sharp cry. “Axel, I won't be able to -...”

Axel's lips were still against him, when he drew off him. “Does that mean I should stop?”

Please don't, Roxas almost said, but nodded. “If you want more from me, you must...”

“You don't think I could work you up again?” Axel gazed up at him, and his unnatural eyes glittered all the more, catching every glint in the room.

Some of that light was coming off of Roxas's skin, barely noticeable though it was. It reflected off the gold, brighter and warmer and all the more ethereal. Axel bit his tongue, knowing he shouldn't remark on it and remind Roxas of the unpleasantness that came with that glow.

“I can't be certain, can I?” Roxas moved back, allowing Axel back up onto the bed. His legs were quivering, uncontrolled, and it didn't help matters when Axel quickly undid his breeches.

“Then we won't take that chance. Sit up.”

Roxas eyed his length briefly before acquiescing, eyes flitting from what he could see of Axel's form to the gold around him regularly. As Axel took the oil by his bedside and slicked up his fingers, Roxas occupied himself by running a few gold pieces over his body, cool metal trapped between
For a second, he entertained holding one in his hand and palming his arousal – would it feel good, or would it be too uncomfortable? – but instead he ran it up over a peaked nipple and groaned.

“What would please you more,” Axel postulated, almost casually, as he knelt over Roxas and prompted his legs apart, “if I fucked you with my cock, or with gold?”

Two fingers pressed inside him, and whatever discomfort that came with them was overshadowed completely by the thought he’d put in Roxas’s head. “Nn... Don't...make offers you can’t carry out,” he arched his hips, allowing him entry, seeking more gold with his hands without being able to look. He could feel them against his back, again. It shouldn't have been comfortable, but it was.

“Something to think about,” Axel breathed, voice husky, crooking his fingers and starting to stretch him out slowly. “I'd like to hear you scream...”

Roxas dropped the coins and caught Axel's shoulder instead, trying to steady himself. He remembered this from the first time, sort of, but he wasn't used to the feeling by any means. “What happened to not getting caught?” Roxas swallowed down a stammer, heated and not nearly as pained as he thought he should be.

“Wouldn't be the first whipping I took for you.” On top of him more comfortably, Axel knelt down lower to kiss his chest. “I want to see you need to scream and watch you struggle to hold back...”

Any hesitation Roxas had left was being melted out of him by Axel's voice. Yet, his hips tensed and twitched all the more, completely separate from his consciousness, responding to Axel's hand without being able to help himself.

“I wonder,” he panted, and grasped Axel's hair, “if I recover the way you do now, as well...”

“We could test it,” he mouthed his way up towards Roxas's nipple and bit down just below it. “In small ways...”

He was scissoring him open more, scraping with his teeth and sending little shocks of pain under his skin rather than through it, but even though it was pain it didn't hurt. It didn't make him want to protect himself – instead he wanted to move into it, feel it deeper, feel it more.

Roxas groaned, “What are you promising?”

“To torture you,” Axel said smoothly, and bit him higher, harder. Gold was spilling across his stomach again, the fingers inside probing and pressing – it wasn't even against that sweet spot Roxas knew he could have found if he wanted to, but it didn't need to.

“Oh, hell,” Roxas's breath caught loudly. “Axel...”

His other hand trailed down, bringing coins along for the journey until they were falling over his thighs. Axel twisted the fingers inside of him – when had Axel pressed a third inside, Roxas didn't remember – and sucked viciously at a bite mark he’d left, trying to break skin with another one, drawing blood right up to the surface -

Roxas tried to draw him in close with his body, legs pressing to Axel's sides. “Ngh, you're going to have to torture me faster...”

“Want me to really hurt you?”
Wasn't he, already? “What sort of hurt?”

Axel smirked; Roxas could feel it, as he kissed his way up his throat. “Maybe that's too fast for you.”

“What is?” He wasn't sure why he was offended, but there was something in his tone he didn't like.

“You're not very familiar with pain you like, are you?”

Roxas was about to answer when Axel removed his fingers, slowly and without warning. The feeling of having nothing inside was always stranger; Roxas closed his eyes briefly to readjust.

“Well, this is never exactly comfortable...”

“It's different than that,” Axel told him, but didn't expand on it. Instead he kissed Roxas so hard he thought his lips might bruise and repositioned him. Roxas was almost sitting up, leaning back into the wall, and both his caution and intrigue were piqued.

Axel drew back, and slapped Roxas's thigh, the sound resonating shockingly in the cramped room. Roxas spread his legs apart, eyes widening a little; he wouldn't have expected it so be so loud...

He wouldn't have expected it to be so welcome.

“Not a lot of pain,” Axel murmured, both hands dragging gold up the mattress to surround Roxas with it in mounds. Roxas's chest was rising and falling fast, eyes trailing from Axel's to the mass of warm, glimmering color. Unconsciously, his legs spread apart even wider, a wordless invitation.

“Nn-” he gave a slight jerk as Axel sank his teeth into his thigh; whatever nerve he'd bit down on seemed to be connected directly to his arousal. “That's...not so bad.”

Axel hummed, giving the spot a slow lick. “Sometime later... I'll take you apart.” He missed the bite mark and sat up, Roxas's knees on either side. He grabbed the oil again, starting to slick his erection quickly. “Don't have the patience, right now.”

Roxas never wanted him to know how much he liked the promise, in those words. “Then what are you waiting for?” he challenged.

One gold piece slid from Roxas's abdomen right up his chest, and Axel murmured, “I'm not.”

“Aah...”

The head breached him, Axel lifting Roxas's hips up for him – the arch in his back followed the progress of the gold, opening him up around the too-hot intrusion. Gravity was helping pull him down into Axel's lap, and he was full, the motion so smooth he almost panicked. His legs clamped up around Axel, hands clutched his arms.

“Shh,” Axel hushed him with a purr. “You can't really be too loud... Can you take it?”

“I can...” Roxas was breathless, already past his fear. “Give me time, I can...”

Slowly, one of Axel's hands roved up and down his legs, keeping otherwise still while he soothed him. Roxas was unwinding, grabbing a handful of bedcovers and gold – there wasn't a single chilled piece in the pile, now – and the fullness inside him stopped feeling like an invasion and began to feel like completion, instead. He shifted his weight with a small moan, the effect visibly passing over Axel's expression.

“Good,” Axel bit down on a groan, leaning in and burying his face against Roxas's neck. “Please tell
me I can move, fuck...”

Despite himself, Axel was being careful. Roxas couldn't quite tell until he read the desperation, there; he hadn't realized how much he was holding back until that moment. A strong shiver ran through him, and he regained some of his usual edge.

“I'll run you through with my blade if you don't start moving.”

Axel moaned low. “I love it when you talk like that...”

He began to thrust up into him, the angle sheathing his cock in all-encompassing perfect pressure all around. The oil made it easy, and the way Roxas took him made it wonderful – there was just the right amount of resistance when he pulled himself out, acceptance when he thrust back in. He rut up into Roxas slow and hard, and was drawn into a fast, needy kiss in contrast.

It was disorienting, but in the same way being at the high point of drunkenness was; Axel felt good, hand going to grip Roxas's hip.

“Ah-...” Roxas only broke the kiss in short bursts to breathe, murmuring with more air than voice, “Your hands...”

“Mn,” Axel acknowledged.

“They're -” briefly, he was cut off by lips. “Hot.”

With a laugh, he kissed Roxas harder. “They do that.”

It was difficult to talk, after that, and hard for Roxas to keep his head up. Axel was grinding his hips up, and his prostate was finding some stimulation at last. Connected in so many places, Roxas was acutely aware of the flare to Axel's temperature, and the heat was starting to feel dangerous.

He liked it. He dug his nails into Axel's shoulders hard, and hoped he'd run even hotter.

Axel growled, pulling Roxas back and biting his lip, hips stuttering – Roxas winced delightedly, orgasm at once feeling too close again and wonderfully drawn out. His eyes slid open – he couldn't remember closing them – they were barely focused, gold blurring around Axel, he wouldn't last like this...

But he wanted one more thing.

“Touch me, Axel -”

One hand, fire in flesh form, wrapped around his cock, and Roxas's reality whitened out. Axel was kissing him; he only knew because his cry was silenced by it, and without that outlet it was all he could do to spasm and writhe.

“God, mnn...” Axel stroked him through it until Roxas's cock stopped twitching in his soiled hand, groaning and pounding into him faster. “Rox...”

“Nn, yes...” Tired, spent, Roxas should have been uncomfortable. Axel's thrusts were hard and rocked his entire body, but he didn't care. He was too wrapped up in his warmth, drawing him down a little to kiss Axel's throat and feeling like he might be singeing his lips in the process.

He couldn't tell when Axel came. There was simply a moment in which he became aware that Axel was slowly removing himself from inside of him, and his arms wrapped around Roxas tightly.
"God, I would keep you here forever..."

Stunned, Roxas opened his eyes to look up at him, unsure what to make of that when it was coming from Axel. "... Would you?"

Axel appeared almost fascinated by him. His glow hadn't diminished, having brightened suddenly when he came but fading to a nigh-imperceptible light from under his skin.

"... If I could."

"But you can't," Roxas sighed, too warm and loving it. "There's still a deck going uncleaned up there."

Axel caught him by the chin and kissed him, deep and thorough. Eager to delay, Roxas kissed him back.

"I'll steal you away again," Axel muttered when he pulled away.

"I'd expect nothing less from a pirate."

"Says the one fondling my coin," he purred. Roxas's hand had found a couple of coins, playing with them almost unconsciously.

"It doesn't seem to mind," Roxas grinned shamelessly, scooping them into his palm. "And I've done a lot more than that to your gold, by now."

"It didn't mind that, either." Nonetheless, Axel swiped it back. Roxas frowned, but made no move to chase it.

It was a shame he scowled so often, Axel mused. The smiles were no better, being so blatantly false. No, Roxas was the most beautiful when he wanted... That was perhaps the only thing that still seemed genuine, on him and anyone else on board. 'Want' wasn't an emotion, after all. Not really.

Want was a drive, both base and baseless. Roxas wore it better than anyone.

"I'll tell you what... I'll give you this, if..."

"If?" Roxas echoed warily.

"You let me burn a hand print into you." Axel studied him, and suggested it only because he thought Roxas would enjoy it. The way he'd moaned and clung to his overheated body moments ago... Axel knew he could run too hot during sex.

In the past, it wasn't uncommon for Saix to shove him away and refuse to touch him until he'd cooled down a little. A smug part of him was sure the scorch marks had never come out of the walls and ceiling of Saix's chambers.

Curiosity bled through Roxas's surprise. "Is that part of some ritual?"

"No," Axel smirked. "I just want to mark you the way no one else can."

Something leapt in Roxas's chest, a little. If he'd still had a heartbeat, he would have thought it was that. "... Will it be permanent?" he balked.

"Sadly, no. I'd only burn you a little..."
Roxas tilted his head, letting Axel nip his throat. Something not unlike lust was teasing him, but he was too worn out for it to manifest as anything more than consideration.

“... Show me where you'd do it.”

Axel's clean hand came to rest on the inside of his thigh. Roxas's legs parted a little more to his touch.

That was... intimate, and sensitive. With the heat already coming off him, Roxas might have thought he was doing it already, without his go-ahead, but he wasn't. It could feel more intense than this.

Now that he felt so little else, apart from the physical... Roxas found 'intense' that much more tempting. He bit his lip, sucking it briefly in contemplation, and finally spoke aloud his decision in almost a whisper.

“Burn me.”

Roxas's thigh began to tingle as Axel concentrated heat into his hand, and their lips connected. At first, it only felt like tingling — disappointing, if that was all it was — but, no, he hadn't realized how being branded would feel. It wasn't numbness, nothing like it; Axel's palm felt like embers, spreading out and searing. Finally, Roxas bowed his head, breaking the kiss, and breathed in sharply. He was all but panting, when Axel finally took his hand away, flexing his fingers.

A bright, shining red mark in the shape of Axel's hand had been left behind. Adrenaline surged through Roxas, mixing with exhaustion; it was pleasant, in the strangest way. Axel admired his work while Roxas's fingers drifted to the tender skin around the brand.

“Where Saix and the others can't see... But I'll know,” Axel murmured, satisfied. Roxas's lips tilted.

“I'll be sure not to expose any leg.”

“I'm an exception, I hope,” Axel kissed his cheek, and put a gold coin back in Roxas's hand.

“That remains to be seen.” His fingers closed around it, and Roxas sat up slowly, his burn twinging.

“I seem to be pretty good at getting you into bed, so far.”

“That's not a guarantee.”

“No, but I like my odds.”

“You make tempting offers,” Roxas admitted, dragging his hand along the coins as he stood up. Axel noticed that as he redressed, he left his leg exposed for as long as possible.

“I can continue being tempting.”

Gathering his boots, Roxas sat on the bed again and traced the edge of the mark. “Mm, and this will keep working?”

“I expect so.”

Roxas glanced back at him briefly, Axel stretched out and watching him with no apparent intention of moving, and envied his position a little. He supposed he couldn't even put off getting his trousers back on, and shimmied into them. The burned skin was already starting to improve a little as it disappeared under his clothes. He expected it to be unbearable with the friction of the rough fabric, but it felt as though it had already begun to heal.
He was relatively silent when doing up his belt and his boots, with a thought occurring to him almost out of nowhere.

Namine.

His mouth opened to speak, about to bring her up and ask questions – he'd almost called Axel an ally, and there was a reason for that. Out of everyone on board this ship, he was the only one he thought might ever give him answers.

But he clamped up. Perhaps...that was a secret best kept from everyone. He'd have to confess to breaking into Marluxia's room at minimum, the sea's equivalent to baiting a venomous snake in the grass.

“Before you go,” Axel spoke up when Roxas stood.

“What is it?”

“I only gave you one coin.”

Roxas paused. “...Yes, and?”

“I count at least two.”

He flushed. He couldn't be sure which two coins Axel was seeing, but he supposed his sleeve was the most obvious hiding spot. He tugged at it, removing two coins and letting them clatter onto the bed with a tight smile. “Must have gotten stuck.”

“I'm sure they did,” Axel humored him. “Any more?”

“Of course not. That would be stealing.” Roxas did up the last buckle on his boots.

“Want to know how I know you're lying?”

Rather than curse – which was tempting – Roxas rolled his eyes. “Enlighten me.”


Roxas frowned. “I hardly call it cheating if you can't find any more. Just playing better.”

“I won't take them back,” Axel waved a careless hand. “But only because I'm so nice.”

“And I won't take much,” Roxas fired back.

“I'm pretty sure I took more.”

“You took me,” his eyes narrowed. “I might not be worth much in gold, but I find that pretty valuable.”

“If I didn't agree, I wouldn't let you walk away with anything.”

Roxas was starting towards the door, but he didn't merely walk out. His hand braced against the
doorknob, stalling at the sight of his hand.

He hadn't really paid much attention to himself, when he was dressing. Roxas was understandably focused on stowing gold on his person. But now... The light coming off him irked him.

“Maybe you took my soul, too,” he waved one dully luminescent hand. “Maybe that's why I'm like this, now.”

Axel's smirk faded. “I'd know if I had a soul in me,” he turned over, voice taking on a hollow quality. “Mine, or yours. Whatever happened, it wasn't me.”

“Then the ship. Whatever did it to you has affected me, too,” Roxas sounded bitter, but he didn't feel it like he knew he should. What was there was more like... A memory, perhaps. An echo.

“If you find out what it was... Let me know,” Axel muttered.

Roxas started to sigh, but it was cut off, all the wind taken right out of him at a sudden realization.

The most mysterious factor he'd encountered, the oddity – could Namine have done this to him?

“... Roxas?” Axel raised an eyebrow.

His mind was racing. The more he thought of her, the more things seemed to make sense and fit. She hadn't been eager to tell him what sort of power she had, but he could tell it wasn't quite like the rest of the crew. What ability enabled her to know the face of a boy she'd never seen, well enough to draw him, no less? How was she able to know he was still alive? Something about her powers was not as definable as the pirates, and somehow infinitely more sinister.

She could affect people, do things to them. That had to be it. Perhaps that was why Xemnas saw fit to keep her chained up deep in the hull rather than the brig where he and Sora had been kept, and with Marluxia of all people. Roxas hadn't seen much of him, but enough to know no innocent person could be deserving of captivity with him watching over.

Namine was like them, but also... not. Could it be they even feared her power, like some kind of witch?

Mostly to divert Axel from his real train of thought, Roxas voiced something else he'd had on his mind, something that flitted in and out unpleasantly of his awareness from time to time. “Back at the tavern... For that much gold, and for my own interest, I would have flirted... given you special attention, maybe even kissed you.”

Axel sat up, when he spoke. Roxas wasn't looking at him.

“I don't think I would have let you into my bed,” he continued. “... No, I'm sure I wouldn't have.”

He didn't interrupt. Axel couldn't exactly bring himself to be offended, all things considered.

“But you kidnapped me. You whipped me.” Roxas spoke as though giving a report, more or less level, not even accusing. “You did the same to my brother and left him for dead. You turned me into something I hate in order to survive. And now... I'm here.”

“Here, and glowing like a monster,” Axel supplied.

“... Right.” It wasn't as though he'd forgotten. “And in spite of everything, I'm glad Sora's not here. I don't know if I'd feel the same if he'd drowned. I don't know if this is worse than death.”
Axel got up from the bed. “You don't feel anything. Do you?”

It was the only answer that came easily to him. “No. Not anything real.”

For some reason... That was disappointing. Axel didn't know why he'd expected any different.

“... Looks like it's official.”

“So that comes with it,” Roxas calmly interpreted. “I should have figured.”

“It's why we're on this ship,” Axel advanced on him, and Roxas's back pressed firmly against the door. The lash marks were perfectly healed by now. He didn't look often, but he had a feeling they'd barely even scarred. “... Do you remember what feeling was like?”

“Perfectly.” He tensed, as Axel's hand ran over his hair.

“Lucky you,” he murmured. “We can only pretend.”

Roxas wondered if he'd always sounded so empty, or if he'd just feigned it well up until now. “Then congratulations. You made a convincing performance.”

“I know,” Axel grinned, so very lacking. “Sometimes, I can even convince myself.”

They were both silent, for a moment, and there should have been something there. An expectation of more words, a fondness, a discomfort. Instead, there was just nothing.

“... You should go.”

“Take a step back, and I will.”

Axel obliged. Roxas pulled himself off the door, pivoting to swing it open and retreating into the dim hallway. He heard Axel bolt the door, behind him.

It was so much colder outside of Axel's room than he remembered. Roxas's fingers found the burn mark again, pressing down against it with the intent to hurt, and inhaling sharply when it stung.

Somehow, it was a relief to know it hadn't gone numb.

Or... What he experienced wasn't relief. More like it's shadow.

Roxas dragged his feet on his way to the deck, and couldn't remember any of the words to the shanty he'd been singing before. All night, he thought only of Namine, theories each more wild and terrifying than the last, and he knew that he needed to see her again soon.
Although Sora would have considered himself well-traveled, *never* had he been so close to a genuine castle before. For that matter, he'd never even *seen* one.

It was extravagant, the palace walls made from gleaming stone and built so high that Sora had to crane his neck in order to still be able to see the flags – the same colors the Highwind flew, he'd known it on-sight – and the morning sun could only peek over the top-most towers. They were coming up to the Keep, and still had a slight trek to get through before they were actually inside.

Riku had brought very few men of his crew along with him, only those who held rank. Though one or two looked sour over the fact that Sora was considered important enough to come along, neither Riku or Sora paid them much heed as they led the procession across the lowered drawbridge. Sora's head snapped down to look into the moat, fascinated – he'd never seen an actual *moat* before...

For Riku, the castle was less impressive and more familiar. He had been raised inside those grand walls; Riku knew the palace as home more than anywhere else, though his family *had* accommodations elsewhere. Still, the Royal family had welcomed another high-standing child to keep their daughter entertained, and with the sea spanning the Kingdom's nearest border, the Admiral had been of value to have nearby.

His father was in there, and Riku was about to see him for the first time since the Highwind had set sail, over one year ago.

Sora's presence was a comfort, but he was still...anxious about it.

“Do you think you're ready?” Riku slanted his gaze towards Sora, giving him another compulsive inspection – he'd been, perhaps, over-conscious of how Sora was dressed. The Admiral would have been furious to see a civilian in a uniform, but there weren't a great many other clothes on board. Sora was dressed in the most proper clothing they could find, and his hair – while still in the disarray it couldn't help but be in – had been almost tamed.

That wild head pulled itself from where it had been hanging out over the water as Sora turned to answer.

“Sure. I really just have to stand at your side and support what you say, right?” Not nearly so worried, he smiled.

“For the most part... Yes.”

“Then I'll be fine!” Sora practically exuded confidence. Riku almost envied that. Would have, if he didn't love that it came so naturally to him.

“... I wish I had your optimism,” Riku gave him a fond look.

“Don't worry about it,” Sora declared, “I've got you.”

If they hadn't been in public, Riku would have kissed him. Instead he stopped inside the castle gates, watching the drawbridge as it was raised up one crank at a time, and his soldiers straightened up into salutes.
“I will be reporting in first, before the Admiral will require you all to discuss the ship and our progress. Wait here in the bailey for now, I imagine you’ll be escorted in shortly,” he instructed his men, who belted acknowledgement and fell into easy stances and low conversation when Riku turned to march up to the castle doors. Sora followed, looking back at the massive walls around them and the busy grounds.

He'd sort of expected there to be nothing but grass between the Keep walls and the palace ones, but there was obviously no shortage of things the Royal Family needed on-hand. There were stables, in the distance, a hen house and probably other animals... Gardens, both practical and decorative. They'd placed a marble fountain dead-center of the glittering pond; the figure of a beautiful woman wielding some kind of sword.

“... When you meet my father-...”

“Yes?” Sora's head snapped back to Riku.

“Don't say anything to challenge him,” he cautioned.

“... Hopefully I shouldn't have to,” Sora smiled, not thinking that would be a likely scenario anyway.

To his surprise, Riku's expression was grave.

“I hope so.”

He'd underestimated how serious this was, for Riku. Sora's smile faltered, and perhaps would have fallen completely had Riku not taken his hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze, hoping Riku understood from it that things wouldn't be however bad he was thinking they'd be.

Neither of them let go until they were within sight of the castle guards, and then Riku withdrew his hand so quickly that Sora thought he might have somehow wounded him. Riku's eyes were forward, hand going into his jacket to remove documentation.

They were allowed through in a trice, Sora almost wishing it had taken longer so he could admire the gleaming armor and ornate livery, and then they found themselves within the grandest vestibule ever conceived. To Sora, it looked like nothing less than a hall torn from a fairy tale. He faltered, silently impressed and equally awkward.

He didn't belong here. Riku, though, held himself like a noble – was he, for that matter? Sora had no idea whether someone had to be nobility to be an Admiral, but it sounded like a position someone might get by blood. And, if that was the case...

Had he been taunting and flirting with a noble all this time? Never mind that, had he bedded one?!

Sora's eyes were drawn to the swords on each belt of a small group of naval officers up ahead. He almost didn't look up in time to notice that they were headed in that very direction, or see the imposing figure standing at the center.

Riku's head was high, air one of dignity, and he was making straight for a silver-haired man in a decorated uniform. However, that was there the similarities between them ended, which made it unexpected when Riku snapped to a salute right before him and greeted him with, “... Father.”

Of course he'd been waiting. Ansem would want to see him first thing to see how he was coming along. There was an initial stirring of his worry, wondering how long he'd been waiting and what Ansem might say about it, before instinct took over and silenced it.
“My son,” Ansem gave the smallest, most fluid nod to Riku, a gesture to mean that he could drop his salute. “Or should I say, Captain Riku.”

“I suppose I should say Admiral,” Riku briefly bowed his head, hand lowering to his side. Sora's eyes flickered between the two, a little wide-eyed.

Whenever he'd pictured the Admiral, he always envisioned an older version of Riku. They really didn't have much visibly in common, and he wondered what Riku's mother was like.

Those eyes, especially, a burning amber color...

With a lurch, Sora realized where he'd seen eyes like that. Ansem's did not glow, but in all other ways they reminded him of the terrible Captain of the Never Was crew.

“I'm glad your letter reached us. It's been quite some time since I saw you last.” Very subtly, Ansem's gaze drifted. “How fares the Highwind.”

It didn't come across as a question, and although Riku pretended not to notice the inspection, his shoulders reflexively drew back. “Strong as ever.”

“I expect her to be, with you at the helm, my Riku.”

Riku's chin lifted a little, responsive to the praise. “Thank you, Admiral.”

With the niceties aside, Ansem seemed to only just notice that anyone apart from his son existed. Piercingly, he looked at Sora, who drew his stance up to be stiff and straight. Sora had no idea what he was supposed to do, but saluting the way Riku had seemed a good place to start.

“Sir!” he said, by way of greeting.

“This is not one of the recruits I selected for you,” Ansem observed.

“No, Admiral. He escaped imprisonment on the Ship That Never Was.”

Ansem's eyebrows raised, and his gaze came back to Riku. His deep voice, however, stayed level, never once betraying what he might be thinking – another similarity that made Sora tense up a little in spite of himself, and the scars across his back twinge uncomfortably. “That does make him quite exceptional. Does this mean you have made progress on their location?”

“Yes, sir – a bit of progress, in that we know their heading, and plans I must discuss with you later. Given our prior lack of leads, that's nothing to dismiss,” Riku's eyes flickered to Sora, failing to completely conceal a look of pride. “He's also more adept with a blade than anyone assigned to my crew.”

Sora's stance was still rigid, awaiting some indication that he could relax. The return of Ansem's cold stare didn't make him feel like he was allowed just yet.

“That is very impressive, but you are still aware that only a trained soldier of the Royal Navy can act as a member of your crew?”

Perhaps Riku had known, but Sora hadn't. He shrank slightly.

“I'm aware, Admiral. I'd like to appeal to the court to enlist him...” Riku swallowed. “Temporarily.”

Ansem was a hard man to read, but Riku was sure... He disliked Sora already.
“We can discuss whether that is even a possibility later, when we decide what course of action the Highwind will take next,” Ansem's deep, smooth voice had lowered, as though he was excluding Sora from the conversation despite that he hadn't moved from the spot a foot from Riku's side. “For now Her Grace, Princess Kairi, wishes to hear your report.”

“Yes, Admiral.” Riku saluted, and just because he was, Sora drew his salute up again. Ansem gave them their dismissal, and feeling began to return to Riku once they were striding on through the grand hall to meet with the princess.

It was an automatic response, one he'd adopted very young. The easiest way to win his father's approval was through adherence to his training; the more perfect he was, the more Ansem was pleased. He was a formidable man... To displease him had consequences. Dire ones.

Being perfect could prove more of a challenge if he allowed himself to be distracted, and so numbing his emotions and will in the moment was just second nature. But, after...

Riku felt his stomach sink acutely. Ansem didn't approve of Sora.

He'd expected as much, but... It was still disheartening.

Sora didn't seem nearly so bothered. Now that they'd left Ansem's presence, his attention was back on the castle's splendor – light streamed in through round stained glass windows, and Sora wanted to pause at each one to take in the scene they depicted.

Despite himself, Riku smiled a little. He kept a gentle hand on Sora's shoulder, steering him along until they'd reached the study he knew they were meant to report in, and carved doors were opened for them.

The young woman behind the table was easily the loveliest girl Riku had ever known, with shining red hair and eyes blue enough to rival Sora's. Her gown took up such an incredible amount of space that it nearly didn't fit alongside the large table, which had been cleared but a huge map for military planning. By the looks of things, Kairi had ordered the study emptied of everything that wouldn't be relevant to her visitors.

Riku bowed the moment he entered the room, and Sora did the same, bending so quickly that he didn't even get a look at her face.

“Your Highness.”

Kairi's face lit up. “Oh, Riku!” she squeezed around the side of the table, dropping formality as much as was still seemly. “I'm so glad to see you again.”

He lifted his head, almost surprised by how little she'd seemed to change after so long, but Riku regarded her all the more warmly for it. “... Kairi, this is Sora. He was on their ship. Sora,” Riku tapped his arm, “this is Princess Kairi.”

Finally, Sora raised his head, and was briefly dazzled by how beautiful she was. Riku had spoken briefly of knowing her in childhood, but it was still a shock to see that she must have been about Sora's age, and nearly his height, too, if they had stood back to back. As far as Sora was concerned, though, he and the girl before him couldn't have been less like each other.

A real princess – Sora's head spun, and his embarrassment was ten times more acute when he realized he didn't know how to greet royalty any more than an Admiral. “Um, your... Your Majesty.”

“Highness,” Riku corrected under his breath.
Kairi gave the two of them a small curtsey in return, eyes wide. “It's nice to meet you. You really survived being on that ship?”

Sora was momentarily flustered, at a slight loss for words.

“Capably,” Riku answered for him, striding over towards the table. “And he's given us a lead.”

“Do you have a heading?” Kairi hovered eagerly over the map, watching Riku begin charting their course up until now.

“Well, sort of,” Sora came forward, not totally sure whether or not he was allowed to talk to a princess. “I knew what direction they were heading in when I was thrown overboard, and where that's likely to take them. We were driving them towards the rocks, right before we almost got caught in that storm.”

“That's more than we've ever had,” Kairi marvelled, eyes glimmering. “Tell me everything, please.”

“Everything?” With a blink, he looked to Riku and found that he was deeply engrossed in his task. “Well... My brother, Roxas, and I were taken prisoner here,” Sora leaned forward and tapped a red pin Riku had planted. “In Twilight Town. I was only on the ship a few days before we tried to escape, and I was tossed overboard. But, when I was floating away the ship was moving...” his finger followed the path of Riku’s pins, “this way, and we’ve followed them for a really long time. We think – well, Riku thinks...”

“With your input,” Riku briefly looked up from his task. “Sora pointed out they'd hit a rock formation on their current path, which should slow them down enough for us to catch up. If we flank them with additional ships, we could force them into a standstill and engage them – it shouldn't even be hard, now that they're so close to the Kingdom...”

Kairi listened, but her thoughts weren't entirely with the attack plan. “... You had a brother taken captive as well?”

Riku paused in plotting the Never Was crew's course. He wished he could offer some comfort to Sora without being overtly affectionate; he trusted Kairi, but it would be for the better if no one knew.

“...That's right,” Sora nodded a bit, suddenly more subdued. “My twin brother, Roxas.”

“And... Where is he, now?” Kairi’s question was gentle, understanding.

“... Still on the ship, last I saw him. But that was a while ago,” Sora looked down at the map. “I don't know, now...”

“I’m sorry,” Kairi looked as though she regretted asking, but Riku knew that wasn’t it. If anyone knew just what Sora's situation felt like, it was her. “But no news means there's still hope.”

Slowly, Sora began to smile again. “You're right.”

“He reported no sign of Namine, but we have no reason to believe they don't still have her,” Riku carefully interjected.

“... Yes,” Kairi went quieter. “Thank you.”

“But I really wasn't there very long,” Sora hastened to be encouraging. “I'm sure if I'd stuck around I would have heard about... Who, again?”
“Lady Namine,” Kairi wrung her hands. “She's a ward of the Royal Family, but to me she's a sister.”

“She's been captive for years. Any time not spent tracking the ship directly has been spent searching every port for a sign of her,” Riku expanded.

“But no actual word of her has reached us...”

He had been wrong, Riku realized. Kairi had indeed changed; when he’d left, her expression would have still twisted at the topic, she would have had to fight back tears. She'd become much better at putting on a brave face, and the pain was all in her eyes.

“I'm sorry,” Riku felt a tightness across his chest. Guilt.

Sora had inched his hand towards Kairi’s, waiting for an indication that he shouldn't, and slowly rested it over one of hers. “We will find her, Princess,” he vowed strongly.

To touch a member of the Royal Family was worth another whipping at least, but Sora hadn't known; he'd spoken to her as he would have comforted anyone, and it had more of an effect that way. Faintly, she smiled. “... Thank you.”

“... We won't be docked long, and once we leave, we have a heading. More than that, we have a plan of attack,” Riku offered his own sort of comfort. “That's more than we've ever been able to say.”

Kairi nodded in slow consideration. “How long will you be gone, this time?”

“... I don't know,” Riku answered honestly. “If all goes well, this shouldn't go on much longer, but I don't want to count on things happening flawlessly. No matter what happens, I won't return until I can bring Namine home.”

“Yeah,” Sora chimed in. “As long as it takes.”

Kairi smiled again, a bit sadly. “You're right,” she sighed softly, and tore her eyes off the map. “When do you leave? I want to at least give you both a proper dinner before you go.”

“I'll be arranging things with the Admiral and helping oversee the assembly of our reinforcements, but that honestly shouldn't take very long. We should be gone by dawn tomorrow.”

“Then you'll find rooms prepared for you,” Kairi nodded. “Dinner will be at eight.”

Sora brightened a little at the prospect of another meal as grand as the one he shared with Riku, or perhaps even more so. “It was nice to meet you, Princess,” he told her genuinely. He almost forgot to bow until Riku did.

“Thank you... Your Highness,” he righted himself.

“No need to thank me, Captain. This is all I can do,” Kairi’s hands folded across her dress, perfected composure back in place. Thinking it merely a sign of the regained formality, Riku took it at face value and nudged Sora into standing tall.

Bidding each other farewell, Riku left the study with Sora in tow, hearing the guard shut the door behind them.

“She's in better spirits than I'd hoped,” was the first thing he said, though he couldn't shake the memory of her sad eyes from his head.
“That's good, isn't it?”

“I think so,” he agreed. “Maybe it's because of you.”

“Me?” Sora laughed. “I don't know about that. I don't even know how to talk to royalty.”

“Kairi and I have been friends for a long time – that was fine,” Riku reassured him. “If you'd been anyone else, or in different company, they would claim we're both too casual with her... But I know she hates that. You spoke with her honestly, and she liked that. More importantly, you're a sign that we're getting close.”

There'd been a touch of a sheepish tinge to Sora's cheeks, but it allayed. “That's true. And we really are going to find her.”

“We will,” Riku agreed. “We have to...”

“How could we not, with the two of us together?”

They'd left the corridor and found themselves in a vacant one. The sun was shining brighter, outside, lighting up the stained glass dazzlingly. It created an illusion, making Sora appear aglow.

Riku stopped them in their tracks. “... I want to kiss you. That alright?”

Sora paused, then smiled. “Is that safe?”

“If we're not caught... Perfectly safe.”

His hands slid over Riku's shoulders. “Kiss me, then.”

Even knowing they were alone, Riku still checked around before leaning in and gently meeting his lips. Sora tilted his head and shifted his weight against the balls of his feet, bringing himself up to be nearer to Riku's height. For the first time since their arrival, Sora relaxed completely.

He wished he could feel Riku unwind the same way, but even as they lingered over the kiss, Riku seemed preoccupied.

It took willpower not to kiss Sora more deeply, and just as much to keep kissing him when he felt like they could be caught at any moment. Riku broke away, and gazed at him fondly.

“... Tonight, I'm going to talk to my father about you.”

“You think he'll really let me serve with your crew?”

“You're qualified and more knowledgeable about the Never Was crew than anyone else... And now the Princess likes you. He should agree.”

Sora beamed. “Great. Will I see you at all after dinner?”

Riku hesitated. “I'll try to see you, but he may want to speak to me...”

“But... He won't keep you all night, will he?”

“... It's been some time since we've been able to talk. We'll have a lot to catch up on...”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Sora didn't seem to notice that Riku hadn't exactly answered the question.
“Yes...” he averted his gaze. Privately, Riku was irritated with himself for being so averse to the idea of missing Sora for one night, even to spend it with the man who raised and cared for him. It was uncomfortably selfish. “If I don't see you after dinner, I'll see you first thing in the morning.”

“First thing,” Sora repeated with a smile.

“Come on,” Riku grinned back, and took his hand briefly. 'Uncomfortable'. That was rather the key word, and he couldn't let on. Not to Sora, not to Ansem. “I need to make sure my men have set themselves up comfortably...”

“Right away, Captain,” Sora followed contently.

The palace was incredible, the Princess was kind, and they had a plan to pursue the Ship That Never Was. If Sora could have changed anything, he only would have wished that Riku hadn't dropped his hand after only a second, and that something about his demeanor didn't seem wrong.

Marluxia was not difficult to keep track of.

He had more of a sense of grandeur than even the Captain, and a spark of vanity that somehow managed to surpass even Axel's. Marluxia didn't seem to like to be anywhere without making his presence known.

Most of the time.

In his observations, Roxas occasionally found that Marluxia seemed to slip right off the grid, and that meant one of two things: he was occupied, typically with Larxene or (to his distaste) with Axel, or...he was in his quarters. With Namine.

Roxas expected that he'd have to bide his time for Marluxia to pull one of his disappearing acts, and was pleasantly surprised to find that he escaped Roxas's furtive tabs without him having to wait very long at all. That saved him the trouble of possibly conspiring with Axel to lure Marluxia away, and he was glad for it; he didn't want to breathe a word of this to anyone, perhaps Axel most of all. For answers, he was entirely willing to shirk the grunt duties he was supposed to be encumbered with, and take the beating later... But he wasn't willing to show him trust.

Outside Marluxia's door, he listened very closely until he was certain that the silence meant there was only one occupant, and removed his lockpick. He could always work a door open quicker the second time, and it was wiser to wait and be sure.

He couldn't be caught by Marluxia. He'd make sure Roxas never saw Namine again, not to mention... The whip would go to his hand, and his only delight seemed to come from causing pain.

Quiet was all he heard, and the lock was deftly opened. Roxas kept something tucked under his arm, and ducked into the room.

Exactly as she was before, Namine was still tethered to that chair, hands smudged with coal. There was an especially weary look to her, though, and despite that it hadn't been very long since Roxas had seen her, he could have sworn she was thinner. There was so little light to make her out by, but observing her more keenly, he could make out the dimmest sheen to her eyes. They ought to have glowed, like the rest of the crew, but there wasn't enough in her to shine.
Momentarily, he found himself wondering how he thought this girl was a danger to anyone.

“Hello, Roxas.”

Suspicious as he was, he still couldn't help but soften his tone around her. “You're definitely alone...?”

“Yes.” Namine scrutinized him.

“I brought -” Roxas hesitated. “I couldn't save food without someone noticing, or I would have... And you don't look to have much need for jewels or weapons, and that's all I know how to get...”

Faintly surprised, Namine mustered a tiny, sad sort of smile. “I couldn't accept anything. Marluxia would notice, but... Thank you.”

“I have this.” Bringing out his gift from beneath his arm, Roxas held an apparently empty jar aloft. “If you think it would stand out, I can take it back...”

Her expression became one of confusion. “I don't think it would... What-?”

“You seemed grateful for the candle trick.” Roxas explained, and rested his hand on the jar's lid. A brilliant light appeared, trapped inside the glass. It was an unearthly sort of light, completely unlike fire or lightning – it had no obvious source, and didn't flicker or flash. It simply existed, unwavering. Namine herself visibly brightened in demeanor.

“... I love it...” her voice was breathy, awed.

If she really was a witch, Roxas had thought some kind of offering might leave her better disposed towards him, but her reaction was unexpectedly encouraging. He actually felt a little proud of himself. “I've only tested this once, so I can't guarantee it will work... But if I've done it right, the light should only appear when you call for it. That is, when you touch it for a few seconds.”

“That's very thoughtful,” Namine smiled, admiring the light. “I'll treasure it.”

“... Good,” Roxas found a slight smile pulling at him as well, and was unsettled. It almost came to him without prompting, without having to try to remember how. He gathered himself and went on, “When you want the light gone, you just...” he unscrewed the lid, “let it out.”

Nothing visibly escaped, but the light snuffed itself without a trace.

“... If the lid is off, the trick doesn't work.” Roxas almost called it 'magic', but the word felt like a taboo, somehow. Like admitting to the existence of magic could condemn him to this power permanently.

“That will prevent Marluxia from knowing...”

“I hope so,” he nodded. “And, uh, I couldn't get it any dimmer. It seems to always come out that bright.”

“Really?” Namine shifted, sitting forward a little more. She seemed to find that interesting, and Roxas wasn't sure whether to find that disconcerting or not.

He sighed, “Yeah. Always the same. It's a bit hard to bear in a small room like this.”

“I prefer it bright,” Namine extended both hands, as Roxas held the jar in one and the lid in the other.
But he withheld them both.

“There’s something I need before I can give this to you.”

Namine tilted her head slightly, expression hard to read. “... I can provide anything I have.”

“I want to know everything,” Roxas said firmly. “What this ship is, what I am, what you are.”

Regarding him, Namine folded her hands in her lap. “I can only tell you as much as I know. Do you remember...where you came from?”

“Where I came from?” he echoed. “You mean where I was taken captive?”

“No. Before... Far before. You, and your brother...” Namine glanced to her side, where her sketches lay, but she did not reach for them. “Do you remember when you became a person?”

Bewildered, Roxas replied, “I...know I was born on the Destiny Islands.”

Something like sympathy crossed Namine’s face. “... No. You weren’t.”

“And you know this, somehow?” Roxas was on the defensive, not liking that answer.

“Yes,” she confirmed, “because I wasn't born, either.”

“How could I not be born?” he demanded. “I have a brother – a twin. We were born together. That's proof enough.”

He grasped evidence around him like armor, but Namine gave a tiny shake of her head.

“You latched to him, once, and he let you in. He must have been very young, perhaps a newborn... Perhaps still inside his mother, for the two of you to be real twins. You two are part of one another.”

Namine squeezed her own hands. “At one time, all of the Never Was crew was... Maybe the word is, manifested? We were lost. Someone allowed us to be. For you, it was your brother...” She went quieter. “For me, it was Kairi. When she was a little girl, she... found me.”

Roxas listened, and felt ill. He hadn't prepared himself for an answer worse than being transformed by some spell – if Namine was right, he hadn't been changed. This was what he'd always been, until...

“...What was lost?” he asked slowly. “What am I?”

“I don't really know,” Namine confessed softly. “I remember a lot, but... It's hard to put into words. But, when Sora allowed you into his heart, to find a form... You made a deep connection. He made you human. You've been human all this time, until...”

Roxas thought his heart should be sinking, but he felt nothing. “Until I lost him.”

Her eyes lowered. “The longer he's away... The more you'll forget. They all forget, in time.”

“What will I forget?” Roxas's eyes widened. “Sora?”

“What feeling was like. You'll forget that, first.”

“...Right. Of course. Not human...” Slowly, he was piecing things together. “...Is that how you're sure Sora's alive? I mean, if he had died, what would I become?”
“That isn't how I know, but there would be a difference if he passed on. I think you...forget faster? And so many of them have forgotten who they were. What they were.”

“So, I wouldn't... I don't know, disappear?” An echo rang through his hollow chest. He was pretty sure it was dread. “Will I...ever?”

“The Crew hasn't. But you may feel as though you have.”

Roxas leaned back against the door. Gravity had increased on him, or perhaps the depths below were trying to pull him through the floor to crush him. “... Are you the same?”

“Yes,” Namine nodded. “Somewhat... I... I remember everything.”

“Even before what you are now...”

She nodded again.

“And you remember feeling?”

“Yes. Vividly.”

It took him a few moments to take that in. “What exactly are you here for?”

Her eyes slid towards her sketches again. “They use me... They didn't intend to, when they took me. They were just raiding a royal vessel, they thought they might sell me back to the Kingdom unless slavers could offer a better price. I've shown you that I see things. I draw things to come, things that are.”

“You can see the future?” Roxas straightened up.

“Not on purpose,” Namine bit her lip, and tried to find the words she meant. “I mean... Not with any control.”

“Can you answer questions, like a fortune teller?”

If he could know anything about Sora's fate, or his own... that would be something. One real thing to hold onto was all he could ask for, anymore.

She shook her head. “The things I draw come to pass... Sometimes. That's all.”

Truthfully, he didn't grasp the nuance – it sounded like fortune telling, to him. He considered asking her to divine whether or not he'd ever see Sora again, but it sounded like she didn't think she could.

Stepping forward slowly, Roxas held out the jar and lid. “Here.”

Namine's eyes flickered up to his face, like she expected him to retract them again or have second thoughts. When he did no such thing, she accepted them.

“Thank you,” she held the pieces against her stomach, almost cradling the gift. “Um – if I draw Sora... I'll try to hang onto it. As long as I can.”

“What does it mean, if you draw him?”

“My pictures are usually of things relevant to the past, present, or future of the Never Was crew. If I draw anything about the future, and Sora's in it...” she mustered her courage. “I can keep the drawing, unless Marluxia takes it away. But, I'd like you to have it. You... You should get to know
what's going on.”

If Roxas hadn't known better, he'd have thought he felt a twinge of guilt just then for ever having thought ill of her. “... I... Thank you. Will it mean we're any closer, or... will it mean anything?”

“It would mean Sora is doing something to affect our futures. He would probably be closer.”

Roxas nodded. “... One more question, and I gave you that first in hopes you wouldn't just answer to get it from me...”

“I would have answered even if you have nothing to give.”

In the least comforting way possible, Roxas was certain that was true. “If I was with Sora again, if we found him... Would I go back to the way I was? I mean, would I be...whole?”

“... I hope so. That thought is the only reason I can still -” Namine stopped, and drew in a shaky breath. “... Xemnas thinks there's a way. All of them think so. That's why they set sail, what they really want. If there is a way to be whole... I think that must be it.”

The room felt suddenly very cold. Roxas had honestly never suspected their goal was anything more than violence, profit, and chaos. “... Thank you for telling me.”

“You're welcome,” Namine nodded. “It's nice, to have someone to talk to, other than Marluxia or Larxene or Axel...”

Not for the first time, Roxas was wondering why Marluxia kept her in here, what it must be like, but refrained from asking. He didn't even register the information that Axel had indeed known about Namine to begin with.

Those three names in particular, though. When Marluxia was gone... The two of them were, as well. They were meeting up, perhaps clandestinely. “... You don't have any idea what they're doing, do you?”

“They never speak in front of me...”

“That one was a long shot, anyway,” Roxas shrugged.

Namine kept her conclusions and suspicions to herself. “... About... Axel, though...”

“... What about him?”

“... He's changing.”

For a bizarre moment, Roxas thought she meant changing clothes. “Uh – changing how?”

Chewing her lip, Namine made one false start at speaking. “He... It's hard to explain, but before, he seemed... After you came on board, he's been...” she hesitated, and sighed, having difficulty. “Something is different. It's small, and... I don't think the others have seen it, yet. But something has changed, and I think it's because of you.”

He wasn't following. “You think I did something... to Axel.”

“Not intentionally, or consciously. Just, something is different...” she squirmed a little. “Be careful.”

He was all the more baffled, without a single idea what she could mean or how he was supposed to apply her warning. Still, he said, “...Right. I'll be careful.”
“... You should go. Before someone comes back.”

Roxas retreated to the door, pressing an ear by it to listen. “I'll come by again soon,” he told her, and cracked the door open to peek out.

“I'll be here...” Namine murmured, too softly to be heard, and the door clicked shut after Roxas. With a slow breath, she secured the lid of the jar, and held it against her chest.

The room was filled with brilliant light, and Namine quickly closed her eyes. Colorful spots danced along her vision, and if she tried hard enough, she could pretend they took the form of Kairi. Her face in profile, her silhouette... Graceful and lovely, brave and clever. Her heart.

Home.

The ships had all been prepared and the orders arranged, and as Riku had foreseen, it had all been accomplished in a timely manner. He'd been able to bathe before dinner, and he'd done so with extreme care. When eight o'clock came around, he had transformed himself from a military man to a proper gentleman.

He took his time, dining. Every move was calculated, polite to Sora without showing him the degree of familiarity they were both used to. He chatted amiably with the Royal Family when spoken to, discussed the morning’s plans with his officers, and pretended that he wasn't being watched the entire time.

Ansem's eyes had rarely left Riku all night. He knew, specifically, that the Admiral had been analyzing his interactions with Sora most of all, and had tried to keep them to a bare minimum.

He had to make this work. He had to appeal to his father's sense of reason. But...he didn't have it in him to hasten through dinner and rush right to Ansem's room in the castle. Being honest with himself, Riku really would have preferred to avoid their private reunion altogether.

Selfish. Ungrateful. Above all, unacceptable. A little discomfort was not a good reason to avoid his own father.

Thus, scarcely after he’d excused himself, Riku changed from his dining clothes to more casual dress and went right to the living quarters he was so familiar with. Ansem had retired before Riku had finished giving the crewmen their dismissal for the night, and would be waiting for him. Riku knocked sharply on the unguarded door, and found it unlocked a moment later.

Ansem was pouring two glasses of wine.

“... Father,” Riku greeted informally.

“Come in, Riku,” Ansem set down the bottle and held up a glass, offering it to him. Riku closed the door, coming forward to accept it.

“Thank you...”

“Come,” Ansem took a sip from his own. “Sit down.”
Riku only drank after Ansem did, and obeyed, taking a seat on the long couch. The chairs and desk were for guests, he could almost hear Ansem admonish, and certainly not for family. If they were to treat a discussion as business, they may as well have met in the study. Riku tried to get comfortable.

“If there is something you want to ask me, do so now,” Ansem remained standing, lifting his glass.

No preamble. That was almost worse. “... I need your seal of authority, to make Sora a temporary part of my crew. I have no official second-in-command, since I lost the last to infection, only the quartermaster acting in that capacity...”

Almost imperceptibly, Ansem's eyes narrowed. “And you think he is deserving of a position with no training or discipline?”

“He is trained. His skills are incredible – he held his own against me with ease.”

“Is that so?” Ansem took a languid sip. “You're quite sure sentiment had nothing to do with it?”

Riku lowered his glass. “Sentiment?”

His heartbeat picked up.

“You are...” Ansem's lip curled slightly, “fond of him, are you not?”

_Lie_, Riku's mind whispered, but if he'd ever really thought that was an option, he wouldn't have even had to think about it. He glanced at the floor.

“That has nothing to do with his skill...”

“But you don’t deny it.”

“He's...become something of a friend.”

Putting down his wine glass, Ansem sat down beside him and ran a slow hand over Riku's hair. “You've clearly placed a lot of trust in him.”

Riku went perfectly still. “As much as he's earned. I assure you.” His trust was not weak. He would _show_ Ansem that he wasn't weak, no matter how his decisions might come off.

“I thought I taught you better, Riku.” Ansem brushed his hair back over his ear.

“You _did_,” he looked up at him. “I don't trust so easily.”

“But you believe this stranger has earned your trust...”

The silky derision gave Riku pause, unsure how to defend his actions when he put it that way. Sora wasn't a stranger – he felt he knew Sora more than he'd ever known _anyone_. He'd opened up to Riku before he'd even been fully aware of it, and perhaps that had been taking advantage... But involuntary actions proved more than waking ones.

After all, Riku was wide awake, and belying his desires. He wanted to stand. He wanted to tower over Ansem while he was still seated, and assert some manner of power. He wanted to walk out the door.

But he wouldn't.

“... I-...”
Ansem's fingers drifted over his cheek. “Perhaps I gave you too much responsibility while you are still so impressionable...”

“... I'm handling it.”

“Are you?” Ansem's fingertips lightly ran up his jaw. “It seems to me you don't yet have the respect of your crew.”

“... They think I'm in this position because of favoritism.”

“They were always bound to.” Ansem massaged the back of Riku's neck with his nails, lighting up the nerves that were already set on-edge. “It's your job to command their respect. You must be the Captain I trained you to be.”

He was right. Riku swallowed. “... I'll do better.”

“I know you will,” Ansem leaned in close, lips caressing the shell of his ear, the hand at his neck becoming possessive in its grip.

Maybe Ansem meant it, and he really thought he'd do better... But he would still have to prove it.

Riku drank the rest of his wine.

Chapter End Notes

So, it's probably safe to say no one has any confusion about what's going on here, but we know this is a very triggering subject for a lot people, so we decided to fade to black on the rest. We don't need to tell you what happens next.

That said, if you're not uncomfortable with reading on, the continuation of this chapter is written and will be added as a part of the series the same way the XemSai interlude is. Unlike that one, however, you won't miss any plot information if you choose not to read it. Any important points will be repeated at the beginning of the next chapter.

Thanks. We love you. We're outie.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

We're back! We are officially off our not-really-a-hiatus. We wrote so many things in October, and if you haven't read those yet, you totally should. 'Tis not the season for spooky stories anymore, but we had a lot of fun with our Halloween fics, and we think they're pretty neat. There's a funny smutty one, a tragic smutty one, a funny disturbing one, and a straight-up disturbing one with sprinklings of fluff. What's not to love? If scary stories aren't your thing, we also put up our first ever canonverse fic. Six whole chapters of angsty teenagers in love.

Bear with us, we have more news. First of all, please draw your attention to the chapter counter and observe... we actually know when this fic is going to end. We're planned right up to the end and unless some unforeseen circumstance robs us of hands, brains, or internet, we'll be putting out a chapter per week as scheduled right til we're done.

Last news: We have a tumblr! We have very creatively named it lanternjawedstudmuffin.tumblr.com. We would love it if you follow us and if you post mostly KH stuff, we will follow you in return. We will post new story information there, add extra bits, answer questions about our fics, pose questions for our followers to add input, and so on. We're still getting it up and running, but in the near future we'll also be adding some of Stud's art, our cosplay stuff, and everything our little fandom hearts desire. We are also hoping to do a fic/art giveaway once we hit a certain number of followers, AND we are participating in khsecretsanta.tumblr.com’s Secret Santa. Most of all, we want to make some friends within this fandom, we want to have discussions with y'all, and we want to make people suffer, but be... happy about it. So please follow us there, ask us stuff if you want, and feel free to answer some of the questions we've already posted.

One last thought to wrap up this extraordinarily long note: BE WARNED. The events at the end of the last chapter involving Riku and Ansem will be alluded to throughout this chapter, but as before nothing graphic or specific. Hopefully, though, still very unsettling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He attributed a sleepless night to the lack of a soothing sway. Riku had been on a ship for so long that it made sense, that a sturdy bed would take some adjusting to.

He told himself that was the truth of the matter, while pretending he hadn't had the most comfortable rest in his memory just the other night, curled up against Sora at a cozy inn. He pretended he wasn't lying to himself, because if Riku had to think about why he'd slept so fitfully, he wouldn't have been able to come up with an answer.

Rested or not, Riku was still expected to be up at dawn. He got up earlier, taking the opportunity to bathe and spending perhaps longer than necessary scrubbing at himself, then went to meet the man Ansem found more worthy of a position aboard the Highwind than Sora.

At least he'd had some time to put things in perspective; Sora wasn't to be left behind, and having
him close meant the world to Riku – now more than ever, though he loathed to admit to such vulnerability.

They had a plan, he had a crew. He'd have a second-in-command, to be where Riku could not. And he didn't need to say goodbye to Sora. All in all, things were positive.

He was introduced to his new second, Commander Orcus, first thing. He cut a broad and imposing figure, and seemed no more inclined to take Riku seriously than the rest of his crew – he could see it in his bright eyes, and were he not certain that Ansem was only sending the best, he'd wonder if there was something deliberate about that. He sent Orcus ahead to oversee preparation of the vessel, and then joined the Royal Family for breakfast, all while still under his father's careful eye. Kairi did not join them; her handmaiden passed the message on to a valet, informing them all that Her Highness was simply too distraught to see them off, and would be remaining in her chambers for the day.

Riku understood, but was disappointed... And, maybe, a little isolated. There wasn't a single moment to steal away and make sure Sora knew to get up, to get ready, to come with him.

Sora didn't join them for breakfast, either.

He showed up before they were due to leave, to Riku's immeasurable relief. A little flustered in his rush, but bright and smiling – Sora had stayed up late, hoping that Riku might stop by his room at least for a goodnight kiss, but he hadn't let himself be too let down. In a place like this, it was hard to get a moment of definite privacy. He had let himself oversleep, though, and he sheepishly mouthed 'Sorry!' to Riku as he stumbled into the vestibule.

Ansem's displeasure was palpable, and it was surely for this reason that his farewell with Riku was prolonged. He stole him away to a deserted corridor for a brief moment – it was in good taste to give a father and son their moment alone – and Riku passively allowed him to stake claim.

One of his large hands had a firm grip on his shoulder, and pulled Riku right against his chest from behind the moment they were out of sight. Riku could at least acknowledge relief that Ansem kept his affectionate gestures out of view of the entire court and high-ranking officers, sparing him some dignity.

“Keep me close to your heart, my Riku,” Ansem murmured against his ear, and escorted him back to the vestibule with the possessive hand still clutching his shoulder.

They were allowed a carriage back to the docks, and Riku didn't know if it was better or worse that they were joined by the rest of his ranking crew. He wished he could be alone with Sora.

He wished he could be alone without Sora, too, a little.

The crew, and Sora, went on ahead to the ship upon their arrival. Riku had affairs to sort with the stevedore, making sure their ship was well-stocked for a lengthy trip, just in case things went awry. As Ansem had promised him, there was no shortage of food or clean water, fine steel, or anything else they'd want for. The cabin boys they'd picked up from other lands and worked for their fare had moved on, and Riku ordered new ones hired on, making sure they knew exactly what sort of voyage they were in for.

By the time he was done, the ship was ready and the sun was high.

“Everyone accounted for?” he boarded, crew falling into line and saluting. Sora had no obligation to, but did the same from where he stood, with a bright smile in Riku's direction.
“Yes, Captain,” Orcus verified as though daring Riku to challenge his word. Riku tried not to think anything of it; his temper already felt short, this morning.

“And I assume we're ready to disembark.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Take us out and drop the sails once we're clear of the harbor, and I want the cannons checked.” Riku instructed as a sailor raised the gangway. “I don't want to sink them before we know whether or not Lady Namine is on board, but if we can damage their ability to maneuver...”

“I'll make sure it's done, Captain,” Orcus wore an unpleasant sneer, as though the fact that he'd need to take orders from Riku instead of the well-respected Admiral was finally sinking in.

“And the new cabin boys will need acquainting with the ship, have someone see to it,” Riku concluded, feeling the telltale lurch of his ship being directed back onto open water.

“And what shall I tell the sailing master?”

“To look for the dark patch of sky,” Riku said grimly. “Have someone fetch me if the waters start looking rough, whatever I'm doing.”

The Ship That Never Was would not make this easy on them, and he had to simply accept that. Orcus saluted, and made off to delegate.

Riku breathed salty air and felt a little less... on-edge.

They were going towards danger, but he felt inexplicably safer. Out here, he had control. He was master of his ship, of his home. Riku stared at the palace, which seemed so distant now, and wondered when Radiant Garden had become so small.

Carefully, Sora came up from behind him, giving him a cheerful salute. “Captain.”

Riku almost twitched, but then grinned. “Sora.”

He assumed he'd startled Riku. Sora beamed all the more, which was kind of wordless code for 'Don't worry, I'm pretending I didn't see you jump'. “You ready?”

“I've been ready to find that ship for a long while, now.”

“It'll happen this time,” Sora reassured, and put a gentle hand on his arm. Peculiarly, Riku shied away from the touch. Sora dropped his hand down at his side, and wondered if the gesture had been too friendly for the crew to see.

But they'd had a moment to talk, just before boarding – Sora wasn't part of the crew, merely allowed to accompany them. In his estimation, he thought that might mean there was less to worry about, in terms of propriety, and Sora had never been very good at suppressing his affection.

“I hope so,” Riku commented, as though he hadn't even registered his own response. “We owe it to Lady Namine... And to your brother.”

“... Roxas and I have a connection. I'll always find my way back to him.” It was odd; being on land, perhaps, was what punctuated the feeling for him. Sora was sure he could feel Roxas, somewhere on the edge of his consciousness. It was like there was a compass in his chest, trying to point him the right way...
Almost inaudibly, Riku muttered, “Must be nice.”

Just as he felt a link to Roxas, Sora would’ve also sworn he was somehow attuned to Riku. He heard him over the bustle of the ship, the whistle of wind over sea, and bit his lip.

“... Riku...?”

“Hm?” In the second of silence, Riku had resumed staring at the ever-shrinking port, inattentive.

“... You seem kind of... off.”

He hadn't liked to mention it earlier in the day – he knew the Riku he saw was different than what Riku presented to the crew, would be different from what Riku would be expected to be in the palace. But something told him this was beyond that; Riku was just acting strangely. Like he was distracted, or bothered, which would have been understandable, except Sora had seen distracted-Riku and bothered-Riku before... and it wasn't like this.

He was watching Sora like he was trying to guess if he'd come any closer, and speaking to him like he was more shipmate than friend. He was even standing differently.

Maybe it was nothing, maybe there was a perfectly ordinary explanation and this would wear off with enough time back out at sea, but Sora couldn't help but notice how practically immediate this change had come after their night together...

“Do I?” Riku frowned, turning away from the rail. Everyone appeared to be hard at work... And here he was, settling into a fog. He scanned the ship, trying to break out of his haze. “... Just stressed, I suppose. I still don't have their respect. We're finally closing in on the Never Was crew, but with no guarantees that we'll catch them, much less survive, and I wasn't even the one who brought us this far. Everything I've done has all been thanks to you...”

It was no wonder Ansem hadn't been impressed.

“... I haven't proven myself at all.”

“That's not true,” Sora immediately leapt to his defense. “You saved me without even knowing who I was. You commanded the crew through that storm. And no one can track a ship without a trail to follow.”

Riku thought he should interrupt, point out that those things weren't so extraordinary.

“Having my help doesn't make you a worse Captain,” Sora declared, “it makes you a better one. Anyway, you have my respect.”

It was hard not to smile when Sora was so emphatic, and so genuine. “You're a lot more sure than anyone else is. I'd better prove your faith is warranted.”

“That's right,” he encouraged, knowing that the best way to perk Riku up was through a challenge. It worked; Riku was no less exhausted, but his mind felt sharper, that unnamed tension in his chest that had made Riku think he was going to inevitably snap vanishing to who-knew-where.

Part of him wanted to kiss Sora. But he couldn't.

Riku didn't think to wonder why. He just knew, he couldn't.

“I couldn't do this without you,” is all he said, instead.
Sora smiled, looking up to the sky. Clear and blue. “We'll get good distance on a day like today.”

“If all goes according to plan.”

“Come on, Riku,” Sora laughed. “There's nothing to worry about this early.”

While he wanted to agree, Riku sought darkness on the horizon, and spotted it not so far off. Thunderclouds and rain, to the starboard side.

... He was still uncomfortable, in a way he just couldn't put his finger on.

“I won't underestimate them,” he promised himself, and went to put them on course for the storm.

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It wasn't clear what Xemnas wanted, but obviously, it hadn't happened yet.

Roxas's training was only overseen by him infrequently, and never before had the Captain paired him with the ship's most physically imposing crewman; Lexaeus, hulking and bare-handed, snatched at Roxas to hoist him by his shirt and slam him into the deck.

Bloodied, battered, and starting to see double, there had been nothing Roxas could do. At best, he'd evaded Lexaeus, scurrying around the cleared deck. His weapon and light attacks had only glanced off him when he initially tried to attack.

And all the while, Xemnas watched from the quarter deck, arms folded, eyes sharp.

Lexaeus dropped to one knee, and drove his fist straight down into his gut. There was nowhere to collapse to; Roxas could only groan, winded, and threw himself to one side to dart away with a heavily impeding limp.

Get away. He couldn't best Lexaeus, he'd been trying for hours. Roxas could only get away.

Standing up again, the stone that had crusted over Lexaeus's knuckles sank back into his skin, and he walked after Roxas at a completely unhurried pace.

There was no fighting him off. Evade as long as possible, take the beating when he failed, which was happening more often than not as his injuries racked up.

If he only knew what Xemnas wanted him to do. Roxas was beginning to consider the possibility that he wasn't expecting anything. Perhaps he was being punished for some unknown offence, or for no reason at all besides the Captain's amusement.

He wasn't the only one enjoying the show. Several crew members were positioned well back from the main deck, either ordered to observe, or simply abandoning their duties to watch the blood bath. Saix, at the Captain's side as always, Demyx and Xaldin, only half-occupied with their control of the wind and seas, Xigbar draped lazily on the bowsprit as though gravity was a concern of lesser men, and Luxord lounging on the stairs to the upper deck, taking frequent sips from his flask.

Roxas couldn't see Larxene, but heard her unmistakable shriek of laughter every time Lexaeus's fist connected with his soft parts. Zexion and Vexen were, of course, still below, minus one of their usual number.
Marluxia, as expected, was nowhere to be found, and so was Axel.

Roxas had no opportunity to think on this strange arrangement, nor did he spare much thought to the present crew members. It was painfully clear they would neither help or hinder him unless the Captain gave the word, and he'd only lose ground between him and his attacker if he slowed down to appeal to any of them for mercy.

Get away, just get away...

The deck was slippery with what could just as easily have been his own blood as sea water, and his visibility was limited to the glow cast by the lamps, too panicked to light his own way through the night, or at least to maintain it for long.

Thinking fast, the only place Roxas had left to go was up the rope rigging, scrambling up as fast as he could manage. Lexaeus came up to the bottom and merely watched, disallowed from doing anything that might wreck any part of the ship – he hadn't summoned his tomahawk for that reason, and he had too much heft to climb.

That'd been a long shot. Roxas kept climbing, trying to catch his breath long enough to wrap his mind around a more creative solution. He couldn't stay up here for long, that wasn't a satisfying conclusion and he knew it. So, was he to keep up this very unbalanced cat-and-mouse routine until he was pummelled to Xemnas's pleasure, or knocked unconscious? Hell, Lexaeus could kill him like this. He doubted the hulk of a man would even pause to question it, if he was ordered to.

The Captain had indifferently angled himself towards Xaldin, eyes still on Roxas. “Flush him out.”

“Captain,” Xaldin nodded, drawing the wind up from over the sea and blasting Roxas with the full force of it. Buffeted, he could only cling to the rigging as hard as he could, almost bashed right against the mast.

But it drove a certain understanding home. No, the Captain wasn't trying to destroy him, or even deal him out a meaningless beating. There were much quicker, crueler ways to do both, with so many deadly crew members idling around. Surely Xemnas's patience for the spectacle wouldn't have lasted so long, either, unless he was waiting for something.

There had to be a reason – why it was Lexaeus, why Xemnas was taking such a sudden interest.

Roxas had come back to the start. He needed to beat this leviathan, clearly, it was just a matter of how...

The cold whip of air stung his eyes, but he dared to open them to look down.

Lexaeus was simply waiting, immovable. He'd be caught if he went back down. Maybe it wasn't so much a matter of beating him as it was besting him...

Roxas shut his eyes before they could take any more punishment.

... And that was the answer.

Xaldin was increasing the wind speed until it threatened to rip the ropes apart, Roxas's fingers starting to go numb. He dug in his feet and knees to start lowering himself, and let himself fall and skid across the deck when he was in no danger of wounding himself in the process.

Rock enclosed the flesh of Lexaeus's hand again.
Getting to his feet, Roxas summoned up flares of light to hurl at his eyes – weaker than he wanted them to be, but Lexaeus still had to shield them, not braced for it. It didn't stop his approach, though, in fact it hardly slowed him, and even half-blind he had the advantage of uninjured legs.

He advanced on him, and pulled Roxas forward by the throat. His stone hand began to crush.

Vision went white in his panic. Lexaeus would either strangle him or break his neck, Roxas didn't know which would come first, and there would be no recovering from that -

Light burst from his entire body, dazzlingly bright, expanding like an explosion as Roxas struggled. Lexaeus let go, just as it became blinding.

Staggering back, it took Lexaeus a moment to recover from the damage his eyes had taken; he'd closed them the second Roxas glowed too harshly. Blinking, he looked around sharply at the transformation around them.

The first time Roxas had shown his power was much like this, but this lingered. Not a fast-exhausted flare of energy, it spread, climbing upwards and outwards until the horizon ended in white sky and soft gray sea.

The cloudy night had become the palest dawn.

Xemnas smirked.

“At last.”

The crew above deck had come to a dead stop, Larxene marveling from the crow's nest and leaning far over the side, Demyx losing the thread of the current he'd created. Collapsed and panting, Roxas stared up at what he'd done, and felt inscrutable horror settle over him.

“That's enough,” Xemnas called, before Lexaeus could launch into action again. “Well done.”

Xaldin crossed his arms, staring out across the gray water. The light had yet to fade, so stark that the deep blues had been all but washed away. Privately, Lexaeus reviewed every remarkable aspect to add to the considerable amount of notes he'd already written on Roxas, in conjunction with Zexion and Vexen's observations.

“I imagine you're weary,” Xemnas descended from the upper deck, all traces of triumph gone. “You may take some time...”

He stopped a mere step away from Roxas, who had yet to move.

“To recover,” he finished succinctly, as though he was giving Roxas a reward. He should have responded with a 'Yes, Captain', or a thank you, but he wasn't yet capable of words. He simply stared at Xemnas, unthinkingly starting to rub his neck.

It wasn't nearly as injured as it felt under Lexaeus's grip.

“Dismissed,” Xemnas told the crew, turning away.

“Yes, Captain.”

Roxas was left to get to his feet in his own time, the light still not yet faded back to night. Shakily, he stood, knowing exactly where he wanted to go. Who he needed to see.

He'd stake out Marluxia's room. Hopefully 'some time' would stretch on long enough for Marluxia to
She'd managed to stay hidden until nightfall, which she could only guess put them at quite a distance
from the harbor. She didn't honestly know such things; her seafaring knowledge was limited to what
she'd only ever eavesdropped on, gloved hands in her lap and one ear turned towards the Admiral
and Captain while they discussed the goings-on of the Highwind.

Kairi was coming to the steady, inevitable conclusion that she had been perhaps, conceivably, just
the slightest bit overconfident in her ability as a stowaway.

She'd gone on plenty of secret explorations with Riku as a child, and whispered plans for more still
with Namine after the two of them should have been in bed. But those adventures were a far-off
memory – first she'd lost her sister, then Riku's training as an officer left them no more opportunities
to sneak off together. Not to mention the scandal was significantly less if three young children were
captured where they shouldn't be, rather than a boy and girl on the verge of adulthood.

Her years of stillness had been occupied by books of other people's adventures. Merely fancies of the
sort all young noble girls read, where a court lady disguising herself to sneak onto some voyage or
else escape a dangerous captor was practically expected. But they were enough to fill her head with
dreams of sweeping in and saving princesses – or a lady, in this case.

As far as getting onto the ship, Kairi's stories had served her almost flawlessly. She dismissed the
idea of climbing down from her window on climbing ivy or a rope made of bedding right away.
Besides not having ivy growing on the wall below her bedroom, or enough sheets to reach the
ground without requesting more, she was almost certain to be spotted on the way down, and
absolutely certain to raise an alarm if she left a trail of linens right from her window.

It was far more practical to simply slip away in plain sight. No one would question that the princess
was too heavy-hearted to show herself the day her dearest friend left on an ever-more hopeless chase
for her long-lost sister. Kairi could order absolute privacy, her lessons cancelled and meals left at the
door as easily as anything. If they went uneaten, then further proof of her inconsolable state.
Everyone knew ladies were supposed to become waif-like in mourning, anyway.

She only had to wait for her lady's maid to relay the message, and give her final assurance that yes,
she was alright, but preferred to be alone - something she had to express with more sharpness than
she was known to usually speak with to really drive the point home - then slip out of bed and into
something she could travel in. Kairi, of course, like any self respecting princess, kept a set of slightly
grubby and work-worn boys clothes hidden in her wardrobe for just such a purpose (but more
frequently to sneak down to the kitchens at night to eat more than the ladylike portions she would be
given if she sent for a snack).

The kitchens, in fact, were exactly where she had needed to go. It was one of the only doors that lead
outside which could be, and was, used by nearly every sort of servant in the palace, and was almost
always left open. That, she thought, would be the most difficult leg of her journey, since once outside
she would blend flawlessly among the people in the bailey. But inside the palace, and especially in
this wing, she would stand out as being too common. Someone could stop her to demand what she
was doing or try to put her to work, and if she had to speak, she was as good as caught.

But the Highwind's departure (between rumors of demon pirates, a captured royal ward, and the
handsome and supremely eligible young Captain) had caused more of a stir than Kairi could have predicted. Maids and housekeepers were practically nowhere to be found, until they were all found leaning out over the stairs that lead down to the vestibule, or hiding on either side of doorways, giggling and whispering, then giggling and shushing each other, then whispering again. Kairi could have walked right behind them and no one would have looked around to notice her at all, but she chose a corridor they left totally abandoned, just to be sure.

She turned out not to need to go as slowly and cautiously as she did, and found she sort of wished she hadn't. By the time she was safely out into the grounds, the lower-ranking crewmen were already practically out of the gates. There was nothing she could do but sprint, one hand firmly on her cap, and mix herself up in the usual rabble squeezing themselves out on either side of the procession.

Only just arriving in time to find where the cabin boys were lounging, waiting for orders, Kairi had to keep from panting as they were called to board. She was beginning to feel that she could have done a better job with her disguise, realizing now she had been mislead by the term 'cabin boy' all her life. Every one of them looked older than she was, some of them quite clearly not boys at all, but sort of wiry, less-stately men than the rest of the crew.

Kairi hadn't been able to get her hands on a naval officer's uniform, but that was perhaps for the better. She thought she could pass as one of the cabin boys – her disguise was better suited, but not perfect – once she got her sea legs. It would take work, but she wasn't so pampered that she'd find the prospect repugnant.

But as far as she had come, it very nearly all fell apart when an officer – she truthfully didn't know his title – stopped the small gang to inspect them. At once it became painfully clear that she had chosen the most obvious route for stowaways, and a vessel as famous and important as the Highwind would know to be on the lookout for someone trying to slip in unnoticed.

She considered giving herself up then and going meekly back to the palace, but standing behind much taller boys than herself and noticing the leagues of merchants delivering supplies on board, did something far more foolish.

Kairi turned, picked up a heavy sack of what felt like oats from the pile – tall enough to cover her face if she walked directly behind it – and scurried to the nearby set of stairs. She wouldn't pass for a sailor, but she could easily be a merchant's son, at least long enough to find herself a corner to hide away in.

She would have to wait until they were out at sea to come out, and hope no one noticed they were one cabin boy too many. Maybe even until the next port, to be safe, but had no clue when that would be.

If she tried to run now, there was no way of escaping undetected, but still it didn't feel too late. Once they had set sail, she told herself, there would be no chance to turn back. That had been comforting, planning her escape from her bedroom, but now it unearthed all kinds of doubts. What would happen to her if she was discovered? Would they wait long enough to find out she was a woman, or whip her bloody right there? Would that be worse than what might happen if they did find out?

The best thing she could hope for was being brought before Riku, who would know her by sight and ship her home to her furious parents at once.

But was a stowaway even an important enough matter to present the Captain with?

A shameful part of her began to wish someone would find her before they left port. Her punishment would surely be less severe if her parents hadn't been made to worry about her first, but she was too
scared to dare reveal herself now.

In the end, no one did find her. Some time later, without any warning or change in the clamor above her head, the ship jerked powerfully and Kairi knew they'd left the land behind.

Rigid with fear and excitement and the enormity of what she'd just accomplished, Kairi sank down where she estimated she couldn't be seen and didn't move for several hours. For the time being, she chose to hide among the stores with newly-stocked supplies, not wanting to go out of her way to steal food. Not that Kairi thought of it as 'stealing', exactly, considering it all came from the Royal Family.

She wasn't so naive that she expected an easy, comfortable voyage, but her books and tales from the sailors listened to politely over dinner had not truly impressed on her how miserable it would be. She felt sick, and then hungry, which combined with the smell of food all around her made her feel more sick. Her clothes were already damp, and though she'd thought it was completely dark in the ship's depths when she arrived, the night somehow managed to penetrate even here, and of course no one would be down to light lamps. The crates and sacks, though they made the air musty and hard to breathe, at least kept her from getting as cold as she would have in the open.

She just wanted to sleep for a while, but it was much too noisy. The groaning and creaking of the ship was ceaseless, and there was no way of knowing when one of those sounds would turn out to be footsteps...

Kairi rested her head against one of the sacks, thoroughly sorry for herself, but abruptly found herself thinking of Namine.

She'd been so occupied with the getting here, the terror of her plan nearly falling apart, lingering on her own woeful state, Kairi hadn't thought about the reason she was here in the first place since morning.

Namine must have felt everything she was feeling, but by no choice of her own. She would have experienced the same seasickness, the damp chill, the endless, maddening noise. Probably in a cell much worse than where Kairi sat now, maybe being starved to keep her as weak as possible. Namine must have felt the ache of loneliness, wishing to speak to anyone, even herself, but always aware of the danger of being heard.

The worst Kairi had to fear from the men of this ship was simply being found. Maybe a beating, not even that if Riku was alerted, then home to whatever punishment awaited her, but at least home and safe. Namine had endured years of this with no promise of safety, no friend on board to protect her, and no reason to hope she'd ever be home. And who knew what she must fear from her captors. Kairi didn't think she knew enough horrible things to even imagine.

Kairi had often tried to imagine, alone in her bed and against her will, when all the bustle outside her door had finally gone quiet and the sea became the loudest thing she could hear. Cut off and utterly helpless, thinking of Namine's fate had always made her cry, but out here... she was starting to feel braver.

She remembered why she had been brave enough to do this. Screwing up her eyes, Kairi let all her pain swell up inside her and tried, slowly, to turn it into courage.

It cleared her head a little, anyway. She reminded herself this was Riku's ship. Though he wouldn't know it, she'd work right under him, and find comfort in knowing he was close by.

There was another oversight she'd made, though, and she warred with herself for quite some time
before daring to leave her hiding spot.

She wanted a dagger, or some kind of other blade, for protection. If Kairi managed to keep her secret, she couldn't rely on Riku or anyone else to keep her safe, and if she didn't... she should still have a weapon and learn to use it. Disguise or no disguise, they were pursuing the most dangerous pirate crew the world have ever seen, and Kairi... Well, she was a princess, not oblivious to her own importance. She needed a means of defending herself, if it came to it.

Creeping out at a crouch, Kairi braced herself against the wall, hearing footsteps from above and creaking from below. It was hard to discern where any given sound was coming from.

And it was just as hard to see.

She gasped sharply when a hand snatched up her wrist, and bit back on the instinct to yell.

The ruckus that arose went through the ship like a tidal wave – there were shouts and Kairi struggled, needing both to free herself and to keep from knocking her cowl or hat askew, her hair tied up underneath it and the cowl pulled up over her face in an attempt to hide her identity.

“Captain -...”

An officer almost burst into Riku's quarters, breaking off a heated conference immediately. Sora, begrudgingly allowed into the room for the use of his information, almost jumped from his position against the desk chair.

Orcus turned his head, irate sneer still on his face. They'd been arguing over how best to intercept the Ship That Never Was, the path the flank ships would take unchangeable now and the storms their best lead as to the pirates' whereabouts. It had taken most of the conversation to convince Orcus that the pirates would not simply avoid the storm, and were, in fact, the ones perpetuating it.

Riku was getting a headache, and it was in no way helped by Ansem frequently popping back into his head, curiously and unconnected to the conversation at all. Perhaps it was Orcus's presence; there was something about him that reminded Riku of his father's watchful eye.

“Yes?” Looking to the officer, he grabbed his hat, anticipating that he was about to be needed on deck.

“A stowaway has been found on board, sir. He's in custody.”

Sighing, Riku began to head out of his quarters. “Is he on deck?”

“Below, but he's being brought up now.”

Lifting his head, Sora dove around the table to follow, though he was suddenly struck with reservations about going to see what was to become of the stowaway. He didn't know what the protocol was, and he was hesitant to find out.

Riku, visibly irritable, strode past the officer, leaving Orcus to continue poring over the charts. “We'll have to put him to work until we next make port, assuming he's not a criminal... That could take weeks, maybe more.”

Sora relaxed a little. “Is that all...?”

“Most stowaways are young boys who don't know any better...”
There'd been a bit of tightness, working its way up Sora's throat. He felt a bit strange, not having a clear idea of what he'd expected... But it wasn't that.

The roar of the waves below pressed louder against his eardrums.

A small crowd had assembled as the captured stowaway fought tooth and nail against the sailor's grip, both of Kairi's hands grappled with and held behind her back to keep her from getting free. She'd proven to be unexpectedly fierce in her fighting, and kept her head down as she wrestled with her captor.

“Captain,” the beleaguered officer began, “I've caught -”

Sora froze, looking to Riku at the first sight of the stowaway. The baggy clothes did much to hide her figure, and her face was still half-hidden... But the hat had slipped in the scuffle, and there was no mistaking that red hair.

“Kairi -” Riku, taken off-guard, reflexively bowed... but dragged a hand down his face simultaneously, appalled. “Unhand her, immediately.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. She'd known Riku would recognize her, of all people, but she didn't want the entire crew to know – she stammered in protest, but it was already too late. Sora hastily moved to bow as well, and shocked murmurs arose from the crew as she was quickly released.

“What are you doing here?” Riku demanded.

Kairi almost groaned, watching the crew fall to their knees. This was all for nothing, then; now that everyone knew, she'd be taken back to the palace and all would be for naught.

... But she wouldn't go without a fight.

“I...” she summoned her resolve. “I'm going to find Lady Namine.”

With all out in the open, Kairi momentarily forgot how afraid she'd been, cowering among the stores. Now, she was simply annoyed to have gone through that only to be denied, and probably lectured within an inch of her life.

Riku felt staggering foolish for not expecting this. He should have figured it out; her absence that morning, her composure the day before. She must have assembled a disguise earlier, sneaked out early... Earlier than Riku had even left, she'd probably departed right after telling her handmaiden that she'd be indisposed... And, to have escaped notice, she would have boarded somewhere in the time the supplies had been loaded.

He damned the clarity of hindsight. “I will speak with Her Highness privately. Dismissed.”

The men got to their feet and backed off, and Kairi was somewhat relieved to be given the space. She gravitated towards Riku, and Sora's eyes flickered between them constantly.

“We'll go to my quarters...” Riku glanced at Sora. “Will you come along? A princess shouldn't be alone in a man's chambers.”

Kairi almost rolled her eyes.
“Of course, Captain,” Sora instantly agreed, letting Riku lead the way.

Over by his cabin, Orcus stood just outside the door, observing their approach keenly. A distracting throbbing had started to pulse between Riku's eyes, and he was perhaps shorter than he should have been as he dismissed him with an order of, “See to the crew, Commander. Don't let them get distracted by gossip.”

Orcus's lip curled. He'd no doubt expected to be privy to the conversation, if Sora was. “Yes, Captain.”

The headache flared.

Kairi had the decency to look somewhat abashed as she followed, and, feeling the tension, Sora kept a slight distance until they were safely inside, fingers laced behind his head.

Riku waited until the door was shut and locked before sighing explosively. “Your father is going to be furious.”

“The blow would be softened if I returned with my sister,” Kairi immediately defended.

“You don't trust us to get the job done?” Riku tried, and failed, not to glower at royalty. “What will your presence accomplish aside from putting you in danger?”

“You... You haven't found anything in years,” Kairi folded her arms. Stubbornness was easy to find when her opponent was practically family. “Apart from you, Sora, I apologize. Maybe what you need is change.”

Lingering near the door, Sora cautiously asked, “Do you have some way you think you can help...?”

“A valid question.” Riku was staring her down, something he would not do if they hadn't been in relative privacy. Kairi shrank a little.

“The connection Sora talked about having with his brother,” Kairi began, “I feel that with Namine. I can't explain it, but it's how I know she's still alive.” Regaining some of her ground, she placed her hands on her hips, chin up. “And wouldn't that be more useful to have with you than to ship me back to the palace to sit and do nothing?”

“She kind of has a point,” Sora was quick to take her side, amused and rather liking her attitude towards Riku. It was unexpected, compared to her subdued nature inside the palace.

Closing his eyes briefly, Riku circled around his chart. “… This could be... I'm not comfortable endangering you,” he gave Kairi that unrelenting look again, folding his arms. “… But to turn back now would put another day between us and them. Maybe longer.”

Kairi tried to suppress a victorious smile. “I'll be useful to you, if you let me.”

“If it were me, I would have done the same thing to look for Roxas,” Sora thought aloud, tone becoming bright. “I don't see why Kairi can't look for the person she cares about, as long as she's got us protecting her. Oh, uh,” he corrected, “Princess Kairi, I mean.”

She shook her head. “That's alright. The fewer titles we use here, the more comfortable I am.”

“I'm not going to let the crew be casual with you,” Riku argued, but sighed. “… His Majesty will have my head, for this... And if anything happens to you -”
“It’s like Sora said, isn’t it? I have your protection,” she grinned. “But if you don’t think that’s enough, you could start teaching me.”

Sora laughed. “I’d like to meet more princesses like you.”

The two of them would be his undoing. Riku braced a hand against the table, leaning into it and collecting his bearings. Kairi wouldn’t stay idle; she’d never been the type. Training her to defend herself would certainly be safer than letting her find other things to do, around the ship... Knowing Kairi, she’d just try to teach herself swordplay, and without a proper instructor she was liable to get hurt.

“The basics,” he amended. “I will protect you with my life, but you can learn the basics of swordplay.”

“Good,” Kairi chirped, pleased. “I’m ready to learn whatever you have to teach me.”

Riku's tone was dry. “Even restraint?”

She blushed. “Perhaps not tonight.”

Sora caught his lower lip between his teeth, only half-succeeding in keeping himself composed, his cheeks becoming slightly rounded with captive laughter. Riku's eyes flickered to him, and a thought occurred.

“... Sora can be your sparring partner,” he suggested. “If you're willing, that is. I can't divide too much of my time, but the crew... They'd be worried about committing treason. And Sora's second to none, with a sword. Not counting myself.”

Sora looked like he was about to contest that, but Kairi didn't let him get that far.

“I'd be glad to have him. What do you think, Sora?” she turned towards him.

He grinned. “Sure, I'll be your partner! But I won't go too easy on you.”

Riku gave him a look, to cover a smile. “I also expect you to guard her, when I can't.”

“I'll look out for her even when you are there, just in case,” he responded, provoking to get Riku back for his earlier unheeded challenge.

Kairi covered a giggle with her hand. “I can see why you like him so much, Riku.”

“He's alright. Forgets his place, though,” Riku teased, face a little bit flushed. Sora shrugged sheepishly, but didn't stop smiling.

For the first time all day, Ansem slipped Riku's mind.

“As long as he keeps it to this room,” Kairi glanced between the two of them, slipping in the comment to see what they’d do. She hadn't learned nothing from all her time at court, after all.

“Naturally.” Riku ruffled Sora's hair, and he beamed wider, unable to even pretend to be chastened.

“Heh...”

Kairi folded her hands, courtly manners instilled even in the face of her own impropriety. It wasn't polite to pry, but Riku was her oldest friend, and she couldn't held but wonder.
Gently, she began, “I know this isn’t my business...”

“Hm?” Riku glanced at her.

Starting to flush pink, Kairi chose her phrasing carefully. “Am I wrong in assuming you two are... familiar...?”

He almost froze.

Ansem's stare, dominant and disapproving, was in his mind's eye.

Of everyone in the world – if he didn't count Sora, himself – Riku would’ve called Kairi the most trustworthy person he knew. They never kept secrets from each other, only the rest of the world.

The time Kairi had decided to run away and seek adventure, only to come back with a little girl in tow, and they'd concocted a tale together about finding Namine orphaned and alone – even though Riku, himself, had never known (or asked) where she'd come from. The time Riku had, more illegally than he'd realized, stolen an imported paopu fruit to let Kairi and Namine share, while they giggled and hid sticky hands in their dresses. The time that Namine had drawn, with startling detail despite the childish ineptitude, the raiding of a ship by pirates... And she'd begged Riku, with genuine terror, not to let the Admiral go on what should have been a regular crossing between ports.

Riku had taken the imploring request to his father, who had stayed. That ship did not return, and Riku had never told Ansem the true reason he hadn't wanted him to go. It was a secret between himself, Namine, and Kairi.

She wouldn't tell.

“... You're not wrong,” he glanced away, embarrassed. He ought to have supposed she'd know. Kairi had a keen eye; she would have picked up on it sooner or later.

Sora, faintly red himself, looked anywhere but at Riku.

“I'm not offended,” Kairi smiled, reassuring. “I simply don't want there to be secrets between us... My stowing away aside.”

Despite the genuine comfort he took in that, he leveled a serious look at her. “I prefer that not being a secret, either.”

She hesitated. “... A secret from who?”

“Your stowing away? I'd like your parents to know. They'll think you were kidnapped.” As much as he valued keeping Kairi's confidence, he couldn't put the King and Queen through losing another daughter. Clearly, though, Kairi hadn't wanted to hear that.

“What if they demand you bring me back, or send a ship out to get me?” she objected.

“I can advise against turning back, if there's any hope of catching up to Namine. If they send a ship... there's nothing I can do. But,” he went on, seeing Kairi's expression sour, “the Highwind is faster than any ship in our Navy... You would have time.”

She crossed her arms. “Will you at least make a case that I can be useful to my father?”

Riku sighed. “... Yes, of course I will. I'll regret it as I do it, but I will.”

Immediately, her demeanor changed and she smiled. “Thank you.”
“I don’t think it’s such a bad idea,” Sora piped up. “With the two of us together, we’ll know when we’re within fifty leagues of the ship.”

“It will help,” Riku admitted, the skeptical part of him that wondered how such a thing could be long since quashed. “I’m just... Worried.”

“So it will be a relief when I’m able to fend for myself,” Kairi concluded, unrepentant. “Speaking of that...”

“Yes?” Riku gave her perhaps a slightly warning look, not sure how much more he could take.

“My secret may have been given up to everyone on board,” she started quite pointedly, but dropped the tone right after, “but I think I should go on in disguise. Cut my hair and dress as a cabin boy.”

“So that outsiders won’t know,” he nodded. “Yes, that’d be best.”

“Is it really okay for you to cut your hair?” Sora was looking at the glossy red tresses as though it would be a loss.

“Some of your boys may be a bit shaggy – not to say anything of you, Riku – but if any enemies see a woman obviously aboard, they’ll see me as a weakness to all of you. If they somehow guess who I am, even worse...”

“It could get very dangerous, very quickly,” Riku concurred.

Sora started to look worried. He wasn’t sure that was the best plan.

“I’ve seen the pirates attack before. If they don't think you’re important, they just cut you down.”

“That's why you'd better teach me to fight back,” Kairi sounded as though she’d made up her mind.

“Agreed,” Riku hated that he could think of no safer plan. “And we’ll both be guarding you.”

“There's no way this won't be dangerous, so I'll take all the precautions I can,” she promised. Though it didn't quite assuage Riku's concern, Sora felt better when he thought about training her, confident that he could both protect her and teach her best.

“I'll order the crew to keep silent, on your identity.”

“Thank you, again,” Kairi dropped her formal air and took a more casual stance. “For now, I suppose I'll need a place to rest.”

“You shall have a cabin to yourself,” Riku said immediately. He might need to have an officer forfeit theirs, but the presence of royalty would not make the order ill-received; it was a given that a princess wouldn't be stuffed into a bunk, among men.

Kairi looked faintly relieved. “Have you got the room to spare?”

“It's a large ship, Your Highness,” Riku grinned.

“O-of course it is,” Kairi looked embarrassed all over again. “But how am I to know how you house your men?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. That’s my concern.”

“In that case, I'd like to retire now,” she decided. “Leave you two to it.”
Riku's heart almost stopped, hastening to prevent her from jumping to conclusions. “You wouldn't be leaving us to anything...”

She giggled. “If I was, that would be your affair, Captain.”

Getting the sense that they'd both have to endure more teasing from her about this, Sora hastily put in, “We can't mention any of it outside this room.”

“It's very important this isn't spoken of... Especially to anyone who might speak to my father,” Riku compulsively glanced away.

“You say that like I've never kept a secret for you before, Riku,” Kairi's reminded him. “I understand, of course. I wouldn't want to do anything that would make you both unhappy.”

He raised his eyes from the floor, giving her a fond grin. “…Thanks, Kairi.”

The look she gave him was one of genuine affection. “I'm glad to see someone finally making you happy. You can be a bit dreary sometimes, you know.”

Sora contained another laugh, poorly. “You won't have to worry about that.”

“You know you have to show me respect, right? This is my ship.”

“Yes, you are the master of this ship and I am royalty,” Kairi waved a hand. “But you're my friend, and I so rarely get to speak freely to my friends.”

“Dreary', though?” Riku muttered.

“You can be.”

“Serious, maybe.”

“It's more than that,” Kairi shot him down. “You brood terribly. But I haven't seen you brood in Sora's presence.”

“Don't tell him these things,” Riku sighed. Sora watched the exchange, grinning so wide his cheeks had started to hurt.

“He probably knows it already,” Kairi glanced at Sora with a wicked kind of smile.

“I do not brood,” Riku immediately defended himself, informing Sora as though his word against Kairi's should be enough.

Unfortunately, Sora had already decided whose side he was on. “I think you brood a little.”

Riku threw Kairi an accusing look. She simply looked entertained.

“But it's okay,” Sora went on cheerfully. “Because that's what you have me for.”

There was a softness to Riku's tiny grin, and Kairi was gladdened to see it. “I have you to help me guard the princess, now. It'll be a task,” he warned, starting to approach the door.

“Between the two of us, it'll be fine. You just have to keep up with me,” Sora boasted.

Kairi struggled to compose her usual air of dignity, following Riku. “Shall we, Captain?”
“I'll take you to your cabin...”

Sora minded his volume with the door now open and asked, “Should I stay here, Ri-... Captain?”

Riku took a second to think about it. “Yes... I'll be back shortly.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kairi shot them both a private smile before following Riku. Activity had resumed as usual; Riku quickly surveyed the crew and the horizon, and frustration niggled at him when he saw that the storm was no closer.

At least it was confirmation, in his mind, that they could find the pirates there.

He escorted Kairi below deck, grabbing a brief word with the quartermaster to arrange the cabin situation. The quarters of a lower-tier officer would be freed up for her; it hardly befit a princess, but it was privacy and a bed. Kairi issued apologies and thanks, nonetheless, before she was escorted below deck.

“... This really was a thoughtless plan, Your Highness,” Riku murmured, not wanting to be overheard speaking in such a way to royalty. “But... it's good to have you here.”

“I'm glad,” Kairi sighed, gazing up at him. “You understand, don't you? I couldn't bear sitting at court waiting for news to come, any longer.”

“I can imagine. I know how close you always were.”

Her smile was sad. “Yes. But we're close too, Riku. It's not just Namine I miss.”

Riku's heart ached, a little, and he felt guilty. If he'd just succeeded ages ago...

“... I know. It must be lonely.”

“It is,” Kairi confessed softly. “I imagine being out here can be lonely, as well...”

“I'm surrounded, day and night. It's hardly the same thing.”

“That doesn't mean you can't be lonely.”

Riku went quiet, and showed her to the cabin. The officer giving it up could just as easily share; he'd let the quartermaster decide how that worked out. Kairi peered around the tiny space, not used to anything like such living quarters, but she was pleased regardless.

“Thank you, Captain Riku,” she stepped inside. Riku bowed slightly.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Kairi almost laughed, the ceremonious gesture seeming so absurd. She stepped nearer, murmuring, “Try not to worry too much about me.”

“I won't make a promise I can't keep.”

She at least appreciated the honesty. Besides, telling Riku not to be protective would be like trying to dry up the ocean.

“Very well,” she nodded, and sank into as proper a curtsy as she could. It felt strange without a skirt
thrice the width of her body. Without the hoops to support her, she almost stumbled, but recovered smoothly. “Goodnight.”

Riku bowed properly, this time, and then grinned at her. “... I'll send someone by in the morning, to cut your hair.”

“That's very kind. Here I was, thinking I'd just chop it off with a knife.”

“I wouldn't let you do that,” he snorted. “... You know where to find me, if you need me.”

“Of course. And, Riku...”

He stopped, having been about to turn away. “Yes, Your Highness?”

“I truly am happy for you. And Sora as well,” she sounded a little furtive, not wanting to be heard by anyone who might be passing, but the sentiment shone through.

Riku's shoulders relaxed. “Thanks.”

“Goodnight,” she bade him, and retired to the little room.

He did not dawdle on his way back to his own cabin. Sora was lingering over maps and navigational trinkets, inspecting things with varying levels of interest; he didn't want to presume, by going to sit on the bed. He perked up considerably when the door opened, and smiled at Riku as he removed his hat.

“The princess is getting settled...” Riku went to hang it on the wall-mounted hook.

“She's not what I expected from the first time we met,” Sora commented.

“She's headstrong,” Riku sighed. “And she'll probably be the death of me. No one has a better heart than Kairi, though.”

Sora laughed, with no trace of mockery. “You two must have been friends for a long time.”

“We were practically raised together. Neither of us were allowed many other friends.”

“It must be good to have her with you again. Even if it gives you more reason to worry,” Sora's eyes twinkled.

“It complicates things. A lot,” Riku leaned against the table, taking care to avoid knocking anything over. “But... it's nice to see her, outside court.”

Sora nodded, rather pleased to see Riku looking on the bright side. “With your permission, I'll start her training first thing tomorrow.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

“I think this could be fun,” he grinned, and that glint hadn't yet left his gaze. Riku realized, with a bit of a jolt, that Kairi used to take on a similar look when she was getting up to things she oughtn't.

“You two will make me prematurely age,” Riku bemoaned, and Sora started to laugh.

“Your hair's already silver,” he pointed out with a chuckle, starting to step closer.

“Think it makes me look old?”
“No,” Sora glanced at it admiringly. “Just pretty.”

Riku snorted, running a hand through it. The way the strands fell caught the light, almost glittering, and Sora almost flushed.

“You know,” he moved even closer, “it's like we haven't been alone together since we docked.”

There was a sharp pull in both Riku's chest, and his gut. “That's... We haven't, have we?”

“I mean, except for that one moment just before we left for the ship,” Sora dismissed. They'd hardly really been alone, then – they'd exchanged enough words for Sora to be told the conclusion Riku had reached with Ansem, that he would stay as an informant only. Riku had seemed so tired and distant that it hadn't really felt like his Riku, at all.

“Didn't seem to count.”

“So it's not just me thinking that,” Sora watched Riku's expression, and couldn't really figure out what emotions were there.

“Not at all,” Riku agreed, and indeed, he wasn't sure what he was feeling, either. “I'd like to have more time with you.”

Sora grinned hopefully. “Can I kiss you? Since we're alone now and all.”

Riku moved, then, but to sink onto the bed and reach out to Sora to draw him close. “Of course you can.”

There had been an instant in which Riku wanted to say no.

Having no reason to doubt his consent, Sora took the offer of closeness and dropped onto the bed beside him, pulling him into an affectionate kiss.

Riku retracted almost on instinct.

There was this feeling – it hadn't hit him before, not this strongly. Like he could sully Sora.

Startled, Sora faltered, “Um, was that bad?”

“No -” inwardly, Riku kicked himself. “No, it was-... Let me do that again...”

He hesitated, reminded of the way Riku had been acting since that morning. “If you don't want to...”

“It isn't that,” Riku denied, that unknowable thing twisting inside him. It didn't make sense, he adored Sora and wanted nothing more than to be close to him – perhaps Riku was only having trouble out of some skewed sense of fidelity, but what he had with Sora was worlds away from his relationship with Ansem.

He was with Sora out of love, the sort that made his heart brim with warmth and light. Being with Ansem... That was family, that was duty, that was the way a good son rewarded his father for years of unconditional raising and care.

“It isn't that,” he repeated. “I want you, I just -”

Firm in the most gentle way he could be, Sora put his hands on Riku's shoulders. “If you're too tired, or worried, you don't have to try to do too much.”
Some of the tension was chased away by a wave of affection, but it overlapped with the certainty that he was doing something really wrong. “... Do *you* really want this?”

Caught by surprise, Sora laughed. “Me? Why would I be here if I didn't want to do exactly what we've been doing?”

“To please me.”

The laughter faded. “Of course I want to make you happy,” Sora looked confused. “But if I were just acting like I wanted all of this, that wouldn't be making you happy, would it?”

Riku could feel his heart beating. He could feel it acutely, but he couldn't feel anything else. He'd forgotten how to breathe.

“You should go,” he got up, needing to pace – or, his charts, he should return to those.

Maybe he was needed outside. Where there was air...

Sora was a bit stricken, worried. “... Are you sure you want me to...?”

“I've kind of spoiled the mood...” Riku tried to make his tone sound light. “And, I have work to do, I shouldn't be... I'm sorry.”

“... Alright,” Sora managed to smile again, but his eyes were still wide. Something was still wrong, he knew that much. Something had *changed*; was it something he'd done? Something he hadn't done? “I'll see you in the morning.”

“I'll see you...” Riku found it difficult to look at him. He hated this, he felt like he'd done something wrong but he couldn't figure out *what*. “Goodnight, Sora.”

“Get some rest, okay, Riku?” He wished he could at least kiss him, to comfort him.

“I'll try.”

Sora let himself out, and wished him a good night before he left. Riku tried to speak too late, and was left watching the door close without a clue as to what he could even say.

Chapter End Notes

We've been rereading the entire Chronicles of Narnia recently, can you tell?
Kairi's training had exhausted the better part of the morning already, and she hadn't been allowed to handle even a practice sword, yet.

Getting her sealegs had been the first, and rather the most significant hurdle. One had to walk before they could run, and Kairi had to stand without stumbling all over the place before handling a weapon of any kind.

With the sun rising around them, Sora had helped her simply walk up and down the deck and adjust to keeping her balance on a constantly moving surface. Even that stage had taken time to reach – between Sora's reluctance for his own lowly hand to touch one of a Princess's, and Kairi's insistence that she could manage perfectly well on her own thank-you-very-much, it had taken roughly a dozen instances of slipping and clinging to the nearest thing for dear life to overcome both propriety and ego.

Mercifully, there was very little audience to this undignified display. At the first light of dawn, an officer had been roused to trim Kairi's hair and provide her a new set of clothes, which looked to be of the same stock as those Sora wore. Baggy enough to conceal her body, but better fitted for movement than her previous disguise. Not half an hour later, Sora arrived to escort her on deck.

She didn't really look any more like a boy, to Sora's eyes, but he had to admit he'd never seen a lady with that sort of choppy chin-length hair before, and she would definitely blend in better in those clothes. From a distance, or to anyone not looking to see a Princess, it would serve well enough.

Against the Never Was pirates... he wasn't so sure. If they'd had Namine aboard all this time, surely no costume would fool any of them, if they came face-to-face with her double.

But... that was was Sora was there for, he supposed. If they couldn't hide her identity, if he and Riku together failed to defend her or died in the attempt, he'd make sure she could hold her own in a fight.

In her position, if it came down to protecting Roxas against all better judgement, he would have wanted the same. Sora had made Kairi a promise. He would teach her swordplay, as best he could, and chivalrous concern wouldn't make him go back on it.

Besides, for the time being, having another friend aboard sounded like fun. None of the men were poised to warm up to him any time soon, less so than ever with the watchful Orcus around, and best of all she was Riku's friend, too. Having a confidante he could be honest about his and Riku's relationship with would be a huge relief.

... Even if that person happened to be a stunningly beautiful Princess who could have him executed in a second if he didn't mind his manners properly.

Many times that morning, Sora found himself wishing he'd asked Riku for some courtly etiquette lessons before agreeing to this.

In any case, their training began with the sun not even halfway over the horizon, when only a handful of men would be awake and at their posts, and Riku had left instructions to ensure they would face as little interruption as possible. The Highwind would maintain a steady course, allowing the wind and currents to carry her, and any personnel not fulfilling a crucial duty on deck was to remain below until ordered otherwise.

Kairi and Sora could both find reason to be thankful for that. For Kairi, it meant there would be
fewer witnesses to her humiliation. She was going to single-handedly destroy the mysterious
elegance of the monarchy with all her tripping and sliding, squeaking loudly and grabbing onto the
common boy's shoulders every time her feet went out from under her. Sora was just glad there would
be less chance of someone taking his hand off, if it accidentally went somewhere indecent in the act
of catching her.

By the time Kairi could manage a few paces on her own without wobbling, Sora's hands had ended
up just about everywhere there was to go, but she pardoned him for that. She would rather endure a
moment of awkwardness with a friend's hand, she said, than add to her now extensive collection of
bruises.

That was very good of her and all, but it didn't ease Sora's nerves any when he finally declared they
could move on to some actual instruction.

Sora could see that he'd woefully underestimated the difficulty of training an absolute beginner, a
task that might have been lightened if he had any formal training of his own to harken back to. He
and Roxas had just sort of... picked things up, here and there. They had mentors along the way who
got them to stand up straight, correct their boyish technique, and pass on treasured bits of knowledge,
but their most consistent teacher had always been simply beating each other silly, giving up only
when one or both of them could no longer stand.

So here was Sora, absolutely no one, with a jumbled mess of sword fighting knowledge and getting
by in a fight mostly on luck and making it up as he went. And here was Kairi, a Princess raised in
splendor, being taught to dance and walk with grace and make polite conversation, but had probably
never held anything more dangerous than a sewing needle in her entire life.

They had hardly begun, and this was beginning to look hopeless.

At least Kairi could stand and walk around almost capably now, so long as the ship was on calm
water and wasn't jostled suddenly, and that was progress. Sora didn't dare let her get out of arm's
reach yet, though.

Finally he'd worked up the nerve to point out what he'd been thinking about all morning, “You can't
keep walking like a princess, Princess. If you don't keep your legs apart more, and your weight
down, you'll never stop falling,” and that had some effect, once she gave up her amusingly ape-like
exaggeration of this advice.

The sun was up, and they moved on to her stance.

Neither could scarcely remember a more uncomfortable or frustrating few hours.

Sora's teaching style wasn't so much to direct step-by-step, but to set his pupil up and start rattling off
corrections as they went. He would move on to a new concept without a proper introduction, and
had to rapidly backtrack when Kairi very clearly didn't follow. Trying valiantly to keep a linear
thought process though he was, Sora was easily sidetracked, and would interrupt with new, half-
relevant knowledge the instant it entered his head.

Kairi had a life's worth of refinement to unlearn, and Sora wasn't making it easy. It was a simple
enough thing for him to tell her to bend her knees lower, or thrust her chest more forward, and she
adjusted as best she could but it felt like contorting her body in a way it wasn't meant to go. Sora
didn't employ much tact either, and when he did it was annoyingly obvious.

“Hips and shoulders both forward,” he'd said. “No, don't twist them. Move them together like—... no,
not quite like that, um, just... more forward—... actually, never mind, that's fine like that. We can keep
Kairi tried not to lose her temper with him.

Despite acting as her crutch earlier that morning, Sora was also disinclined to touch her. Kairi might have found that commendable and charming any other time, but it was becoming tiresome hearing, “Sorry, Your Highness, I'll just,” and “If you don't mind, Your Highness,” and “A bit more like this, Your Highness,” any time he gave in and realigned an arm or a hip for her.

To herself, for Kairi would never dare admit to thinking it, she began to long for one of the wooden practice swords just so she could whack him over the head with it the next time he called her 'Your Highness'.

Gradually, though, they were arriving at a balance. Kairi got the hang of the basic posture – back straight, legs apart, knees bent, chest out, hips forward, leg and shoulder of her sword hand first, arm out and bent slightly, imaginary sword pointing high on her equally-imaginary opponent's body – and had given Sora a short telling-off for all the fussing about stepping out of bounds. It seemed to settle him a little, and he fell into something much more natural, flitting around her, guiding her body here and there, occasionally interjecting a sudden thought he'd had.

“Don't try any big wide slashes,” he'd note, both hands around her arm and directing it through a cutting motion. “It looks flashy, but it just gives 'em a chance to get at your weak spots. Oh, and don't bother striking at their sword, they just do that in plays and things. You aim for their body, and block when they come at you.”

Demonstrating footwork, he added, “You're gonna be smaller than them. That means you're weaker, but you're also lighter and quicker. Use that. Stay in close, attack where you can reach, like the stomach or the legs. They're gonna be striking down from above, and even if you block they might knock you down or make you drop your sword. Better to get their arm so they can't hold their sword, or make it so they can't stand.

“Rules of engagement are all very nice for knights and fencing matches,” he pointed out, guiding her through blocking techniques, “But don't forget who we're fighting. Pirates will always fight dirty, so you have to fight dirty back. There's no cheating, no one ever said you have to only fight with a sword. If you can trip them, or run them into something, or throw something at them, do it. They'll be trying to do the same to you.”

Getting her to run through a side-step over and over, he advised, “Oh yeah, and remember not to panic if you get cut. In a real fight, you'll get beat up no matter what, even when you're winning. Just because you're bleeding doesn't mean you've lost, yet.”

It was reaching midday when Sora finally declared it was time for a rest, and Kairi agreed wholeheartedly. Already she was sore and sweat-dampened, and her head felt ready to burst – it was just a matter of which would do it, the bounty of new information she had to commit to memory, or the glare of the sun now directly overhead.

Sora fetched them both fresh water and some food rations, and they found a place to sit in relative privacy with the cooling breeze still on their faces.

“You're doing really good,” Sora praised, then catching the look on her face, hastily added, “I mean it! Riku will be happy to hear about your progress.”

“Do you think so? I’d like to make enough progress to stop him looking at me like I’ve doomed us all.”
Sora wondered if that was really Kairi's doing, or something else, but he laughed, “He can’t help worrying about you, but I’ll think he’ll relax a little pretty soon. Anyway, I know deep down he’s glad he doesn’t have to miss you again.”

“Then that makes two of us.” Kairi’s eyes lost some of their light, gazing out across the sunlit deck. “Riku is… very dedicated to finding Namine, and I’m thankful for that, and yet… He goes away for a year at a time, and it’s like I’ve lost them both.”

Sora hated to even imagine loneliness like that. He drooped slightly, “I can see why you’d want to leave…”

“Yes… Oh. I’ve ruined the mood, haven’t I?”

“No, no, it’s okay!” Sora nearly dropped his water, frantic waving meant to be reassuring. “Tell you what, why don’t you tell me about Riku as a kid? That’ll cheer us both up!”

He’d gotten a glimpse of the place Riku grew up now, and met his childhood best friend in the flesh. Sora was painfully curious to hear about a younger Riku, and only partially for fodder to tease him with.

A sudden devious look passed over Kairi's face, as though she had thought of several embarrassing anecdotes all at once, and needed only to pick the best one, “I know he wouldn’t appreciate me telling you stories about him. And I am trying to stay in his good graces at the moment…”

“Aw, not even one story?”

Kairi tilted her head up thoughtfully. “Well, I suppose one, if it’s fairly innocent.” But she pondered for a moment longer, and shook her head, “I’ll think of something. For now, will you tell me about your brother?”

Naked surprise filled Sora's face. “Roxas? I guess, if you really want to hear about us…”

“I do. I think the two of you are like Namine and I, and I would like to know if it’s true.”

Perhaps not exactly the same, but the way Sora spoke of feeling Roxas's presence was much too familiar. And there was something more, some invisible closeness, some connection Kairi already felt to him. She had no better explanation for it.

Sora looked up into the clouds, picturing memory after memory and trying to decide what story he could possibly tell to interest royalty. “Well… me and Roxas have always been together, even before we were born. We were the first twins born on the Islands that anyone could remember.”

“Riku mentioned you’re from the Destiny Islands,” Kairi acknowledged, inwardly hoping to hear a little more about his thoroughly romanticized homeland.

Sora nodded. “We didn’t live there very long, though. We were… I can’t remember exactly. Seven, or maybe eight, when we lost our parents. People started whispering about us being bad luck. People there still think twins are a bad omen, I guess. Almost no one wanted to take us in, and the people who did were scared off by everyone saying we were bad. Eventually, one of the merchant ships that bought fruits to sell from our island brought us on board, the Captain said he would take us to the mainland to find a home.

“But it turned out we liked him so much that by the time we got there, we were begging to stay on his ship. And Cid – that was his name, by the way – said he’d let us earn our stay by working. I don’t think he ever gave us real work, mostly it was just running messages to his crew, and peeling
potatoes for dinner. But, anyway, that’s how we lived with him, even though it was only a couple of years before he retired.” He grinned, caught up in recalling their fun years aboard Cid’s ship, then started, realizing he’d been rambling on for what was likely far too long. “Sorry, I’m probably boring you now.”

Far from disinterested, Kairi was enraptured, leaning closer to him. “Not at all. You’ve led an exciting life, Sora.”

“That’s not even half of it,” Sora continued with a laugh. “We lived all over the place after that. Basically, wherever there was work, we lived there until the work was done. Mostly on ships, since the merchants out of Traverse Town all knew Cid, and trusted us on his word. But when there wasn’t work, it could get bad for us, and coin ran out fast. Roxas got tired of ships, and working scraps, too, so we got off at Twilight Town, and he found us jobs and a room to stay in at a tavern there.”

“Sounds like you took good care of each other.” To Kairi’s ears, Sora and Roxas were the perfect urchin children from a storybook, surviving off their wits and each other. She tried not to let her excitement shine through too obviously.

“Well, I won’t tell you what the tavern was like, but yeah, Roxas always looked out for me. I got in a lot more trouble than he did, working on all those different ships, and he had to find ways to get me out. I think it made him a lot more serious as we got older, but if he was here, he’d probably say I just never grew up.”

If he thought hard enough, he could almost hear the words in Roxas’s voice. He hoped he was remembering it right.

Kairi giggled, but sobered quickly, “And… this is the first time you’ve been apart?”

Dragged out of his memories into reality, Sora confirmed, “… That’s right. All we had was each other, after we left the Islands. Even before that, we used to get sick if we were separated for more than a day or two. Maybe because we’re twins, but I just—... I feel him being gone. I miss him, and sometimes I almost feel him miss me.”

A quiet moment passed between them, almost an understanding. Each of them knew this rare feeling, neither could describe it properly to anyone else.

Finally, Kairi spoke up softly, “It’s the same, for me.” She glanced at him, summoning the courage to voice her thoughts. “Sora, I think you’re the only one who understands this connection I have with Namine. Maybe you’re the only one who can, because you can feel it, too. Riku doesn’t, but he believes me now, at least. He didn’t, before you, but I suppose the two of us make proof.”

There had been no need to say it, Sora was already sure.

“I knew it the moment I saw you,” he grinned.

“I think I might have known, as well, when we met.” Kairi returned the gesture, and paused to inhale. She had only ever expressed what she was about to say to Riku, and she wasn’t sure it had quite gotten through to him, then. “What I have with Namine is… It’s something more special than any bond I’ve ever had. And it’s unique. We call each other sister because we look so alike, and it’s the closest thing to describing how I feel about her, but it’s more than that. We’re—”

“Two parts of the same person?” Sora finished for her.

“Exactly.” It was an immense relief not to have that notion dismissed as girlish fantasy. Kairi could
call Namine her 'dear sister' and 'treasured friend', words ordinary people seemed to understand, but none of that came close to the truth of her feelings.

“After all this time, I think… people expect my grief to be dulled. They expect I’ll forget her, as if she died, but none of that has happened. I remember her as clearly as the day I lost her. I feel her, somewhere out there, so she’s never really been gone. Just… far away. Too far to see, or talk to, or touch… As long as she’s out of my reach, I’m not complete. I could have lost one of my arms or legs and managed more easily than losing her…”

“You put it much prettier than I can,” Sora marveled, sounding just a little bashful. He’d almost forgotten he was holding a conversation with someone far more educated than himself, which made the question in his mind even more untoward. “Your High-… Kairi. Can I ask you something that’s… really not my place, and might make you angry?”

At this, Kairi began to look worried. “I can promise to listen, and try not to be offended… Please, go ahead.”

Sora stared at Kairi for a moment, hardly believing he was about to ask this, then avoided her eyes.

“Did you and Namine, ever… Did you do things together that most brothers and sisters don’t? Like… kissing?”

Of course she hadn't. Kairi and Namine were proper ladies, with manners and... fancy things. How could he ever think nice, royal-blooded girls would get up to the sort of behavior a pair of uncouth orphan boys would?

But Kairi blushed, “We did. I assume you ask because you and Roxas…?”

“Yeah,” Sora's relief became a sheepish sort of grin, “sometimes, I mean. It wasn’t like we were ever lovers, of course, but we were always close, even for brothers. Roxas didn’t like to be touched all the time, but neither of us ever minded that we had to share a bed.”

“I know how you feel.” Kairi was doing that thing again, staring wistfully out at the horizon as though she could look through it to the past. “When Namine first came to the palace, I wouldn’t let her be separated from me. We shared my bed in the nursery. When we were too old for that, one of us was always sneaking into the other’s bed at night. We never spent a night apart, even when one of us was sick. Things… didn’t feel right if I wasn’t touching Namine. Sleeping side by side or kissing just made sense. No one minded much when we were children, but if she were here with me now, I don’t think I could stand to be any different.”

Sora nodded, echoing the sentiment. “Once I get Roxas back, I might never let go of him again.”

The words came with a pang. Staying with Roxas meant leaving Riku, more likely than not. But he’d said them with such confidence, so... had he already chosen Roxas? Perhaps he was letting Riku's strange attitude yesterday get under his skin more than he’d thought. But it had planted the seeds of doubt that were taking a creeping hold of him. Somehow, he felt he wasn't needed anymore, or wouldn't be much longer.

Kairi didn’t interrupt either of their thoughts for some time, sipping her water and taking dainty bites of a biscuit.

But there was one thing she needed to know. “… May I ask you something now?”

“Course. You don’t have to ask.”
Mindfully, she lowered her voice until it was almost a whisper. “Is Roxas… really your brother?”

Of all the things he expected her to ask, that made the bottom of Sora’s list. “Huh? What do you mean? I just said we’re twins, didn’t I?”

“I understand that,” Kairi hissed, sounding a little impatient, “but that’s just the thing. Namine and I look almost identical, as if we are twins, but she isn’t my sister by birth at all. The truth is…” Now she gave Sora a deeply serious look, and he forgot ‘Princess’ for a moment, for her low, commanding tone was one of a Queen, “You must swear not to repeat this to anyone. Even Riku. I’ve never told him the whole story. I’m only telling you because I think you might be the same…”

“I swear I won’t tell a soul,” Sora made the oath in a rush, shrinking back under her intensity.

Kairi accepted this, and the regal authority vanished as she relaxed. Nonetheless, she cast a quick look around to be certain they wouldn’t be overheard before beginning again, “The truth is… I’m not sure Namine is even a real person, or if she is now, she wasn’t before I met her…”

Sora blinked. “Not… real? But how could she not be a person… or not be one, and then be one?”

Not long ago, Sora wouldn’t have believed it from the start. But he knew that creatures existed, like humans but not human. He’d seen pirates that could rip a man limb from limb with claw-like hands, and force the wind and sea to bend to their will. Could he know these things to be real, yet doubt that a Princess could have an inhuman twin?

“I can’t be certain my memory is quite correct. I was very small then, and it could all have been something I dreamed up, but… I’ve remembered it the same way, all these years.”

Kairi launched into her story, able to tell it by heart, though she had never told it to another person before. She hadn’t realized how she was bursting with her long-kept secret until the words came spilling out. “I was told so many stories about adventures, and Riku was always off exploring on his own, so I decided to run away and become an adventurer, too. I knew exactly where I wanted to go. “There was a rumor around the palace back then, about a forest in the Kingdom. Everyone who traveled there swore it was haunted.”

“Haunted?” Sora echoed, eager to hear more.

Kairi nodded, her voice becoming something lower, a little hypnotizing, “But not by ghosts. It was haunted by memories.”

Sora’s eyes widened, but he didn’t interrupt. She’d drawn him in effectively, he had to hear this story to the end.

“They said if you went there, you started to remember things that didn’t happen to you, feel the sadness or the joy of someone else’s memories. And if you stayed long enough, you’d forget your own memories, too. Then people who forgot everything just wandered around in the trees because they couldn’t remember how to get out, or where they came from in the first place, and eventually their memories became part of the forest, too. I wanted to see it for myself, just for a little while, not long enough that I’d forget myself in there.”

“Did you really remember someone else’s life there?” Sora asked, curiosity urging him to try and rush her to the point.

But Kairi was going to spin this story as she liked, with every detail she could call to mind. “Well, once I found it, I thought I’d been tricked. I can’t remember how long I spent just walking among the
perfectly ordinary trees. Finally I got fed up and decided to leave and that’s when I felt… something.

“Even now, I can’t quite explain what it was. All of a sudden this horrible loneliness took over me completely, and I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving, anymore. I knew something was there with me, and it didn’t want me to leave. And I remember thinking I should have been terrified – after all, this was probably how all those people had been trapped in the forest, but I just felt sorry for… whatever it was. I tried to tell it to come out, I promised if it did we could leave together. Then I sort of… felt it there, in front of me.”

The ship still rocked under her, the salt air still tousled her shortened hair, but in her mind's eye, Kairi stood in the forest as if she'd never left. The canopy of trees so thick that they made the sunny afternoon go dark, a sea of brilliant green undergrowth twisting around her feet, a constant tripping hazard. And before her, an emptiness that felt full; a nothing that was something.

“It wasn’t like a ghost, not the way you’d usually think of one, anyway. I never saw anything, and it didn’t speak, I could just feel it.”

“And you… think that was Namine?” Kairi was a good storyteller, but at the moment Sora was desperately confused.

“I’ve never been sure what it was. But the lonely feeling, or… the memory, I suppose, I could feel that it needed me. Somehow, I knew it had been lost for a long time, and I wanted to help it if I could. I made it a promise, that if it came with me out of the forest, we could be together, always, and it would never be alone again.”

She heard her own high-pitched child's voice speaking the words, believing with all her innocent heart that she could become the friend it needed.

“As soon as I said the words, the loneliness that had filled up my heart all that time became the happiest feeling I’d ever known, and then… she was just there.”

“Namine? What do you mean, 'just there'?”

“I think she just appeared, but I closed my eyes when it happened, so I don’t really know. All I know is, when I opened them, there was a little girl standing right in front of me, exactly my size and with a face just like mine.

“I thought at first she’d been hiding in the trees, but when I asked where she came from, she just said, “Here,” and when I asked her name, she told me she didn’t have one. Then she started asking all these questions about where we were going and when we’d leave, and I realized maybe she was the feeling, or maybe the feeling was her. I thought, maybe I had just wished it, and made myself a sister.” She'd gone pink in the face again, “I-I was still small, it seemed like it could be possible.”

Sora's eyes shone. It didn't matter how to him much truth there was to the story, he thought it was beautiful, true or not. “That’s amazing…”

Privately relieved he was taking this far-fetched tale so well, Kairi smiled, “After that, I took her to find Riku. I needed him with me when I brought her to my parents, so they wouldn’t know I’d wandered off on my own. On the way, I told her all about the palace we were going to live in together, and the dresses she would wear, and everyone would call her 'Your Highness' or 'My Lady'. I knew she would have to have a name, before I introduced her to anyone, so I called her Namine, after a good fairy from a story I liked.”

She paused, and seemed to have finished. Sora, still reeling, struggled to come up with a reaction
appropriate to everything he'd just been told. “That’s… Wow… What a great story.”

Kairi stared down at her knees. She seemed to have become smaller, somehow.

“I’m so happy that I had Namine as my sister, but now…” She took a shaky breath, “I haven’t kept my promise to her at all. We’re not together, we may never be again, and she’s been alone all this time…”

“That isn’t your fault! The pirates, they’re the ones to blame!”

Kairi raised her eyes to his. They had become something he’d never seen before. Something… a little scary.

“I’m not sure you understand, Sora.” Her hushed tone didn't sound gentle and demure anymore, but ominous; the sound of a warning. “When they raided the ship we were travelling home on, they had already taken her, and I was hiding, but I heard them questioning the Captain. They wanted to know if there was another girl on board, if Namine had a sister, or even a twin. It sounded so important to them. I don’t know why, but I think they knew, or suspected what she was. At the time it didn’t make any sense to me, but now I can’t think of any other reason they would ask about twins…”

Without warning, Sora's skin prickled with phantom sensation. A scarred hand brushing his cheek, long coarse hair tickling him unpleasantly as the one-eyed pirate leaned in too close.

“Look'it those faces... What are you, twins?”

He swallowed hard, and tried to rub the feeling away.

Kairi’s story wasn't finished. “But the Captain lied. He told them there was no other girl aboard, and Namine was an only child, then they slit his throat. I only… I only escaped because the First Mate found me and took me out on one of the boats. No one else survived that raid. Even the First Mate died of his wounds just after he got me home. There’s no one else alive who knows what they asked that night.”

She sniffed, suddenly tearful. “And-… I never told my father. I was afraid… he might find out Namine is different… he might stop trying to find her, if he knew…”

Oh no, Sora didn't want her to cry! Flustered, he blurted out the first reassuring thing he could think of, “U-uh-... Don’t worry about that now. We’re gonna find Namine together, and you can be home safe without anyone finding out!”

“Thank you, Sora,” her voice sounded thick, still, “but you don’t have to comfort me… I’m alright…”

“Just the same… I think you should tell Riku everything you told me.”

Kairi stiffened. “You think that’s a good idea?”

“Definitely. No matter what Namine is, Riku wouldn’t hate her for it. Anyway, it could be a lot worse if the pirates do know about her now, and Riku finds out from them.”

“I suppose…” She wished she could feel as sure as he sounded.

“And he could use any bit of information he can get about them.” Sora didn't know exactly how this revelation would be useful, but it seemed for the first time, someone had a clue as to what the Never Was crew was hunting for. “Who knows, it might help us find them!”
“You could be right,” Kairi found her composure again, drying her eyes with her sleeve for lack of a handkerchief. “I’ll consider it. If I do tell him, will you be there with me? I’d like the support of someone who believes me.”

Sora didn’t miss a beat. “Course I’ll be your back-up.”

“Thank you. But, I meant to ask about Roxas…”

He didn’t wait for the question. “You want to know if we’re like that. If I found Roxas or he found me…?”

“Yes…”

Sora crossed his arms, gazing up again and pulling a number of ridiculous faces while he thought back, long and hard.

When he finally spoke, it was slow, not seeming to have fully settled on the words before they left his mouth, “We-ell, I don’t remember ever finding Roxas, but maybe if it was the other way around, I wouldn’t. But, then again, I know people on the islands – our parents, too – talked about the day we were born like it was this big event, with the twin thing and all. If all those people remember us being born together, I think we must have been.”

Just a touch let down, Kairi had to see the logic, there. “Hm… Maybe the two of you are real twins after all. Maybe something else binds you together…”

“We ate paopu fruit together,” Sora suggested with an encouraging grin, “maybe the legend is true, after all.”

The effect wasn’t quite what he’d hoped for. Kairi seemed to love fairytales and magic so much, and he’d thought such a romantic myth coming true would cheer her up for sure.

Kairi put her head down, a sad smile crossing her face, one that Sora felt certain wasn’t for him. She looked to be recalling a bittersweet memory.

“Even so, I’m certain they kidnapped you because of it. The Ship That Never Was never takes prisoners, unless they expect to get something from them. They have to want people like us… or, like Namine, anyway. There must be others like her out there, and they must look just like another person…”

“So, they’d be looking for identical twins. Any identical twins.”

“I think so.”

Sora shuddered. Somehow, everything that had happened felt significant now. He’d never before considered this could be much bigger than rescuing his brother and a long-lost Princess.

“I’m sorry…” Kairi murmured, when he said nothing.

Sora didn’t want to wonder, anymore. Either Roxas was like Namine – different, and not truly his brother at all – or they were ordinary twins, kidnapped on the chance of being extraordinary. If Roxas hadn’t proved to be anything but human by now, there would be no reason to keep him alive. But they hadn’t killed him or cast him aside yet, and what did that mean?

“The reason doesn’t matter,” He shook his head to banish such thoughts, and spoke firmly, “I’m sure Roxas is alive, and that’s all I need to know.”
Kairi envied him, but she looked at him with a sort of fondness. “I wish I could think that way…”

Deliberate footsteps towards them infringed on the private space they’d created, the two of them looking to the source when it became clear that they were actually being approached. Sitting up straighter, Sora exclaimed, “Captain.”

“Good afternoon, Captain,” Kairi politely chimed in, looking up at Riku’s troubled face.

He’d received news minutes ago from the crow’s nest, and had his spyglass still in-hand. “Your Highness,” he nodded to her. “Whenever you have a moment, I’d like to borrow Sora.”

With a grunt, Sora got up and dusted himself off. “’Scuse me, Princess.”

“Hold on.” Displeased with the turn of events, Kairi used her best ‘royal tone’. “Why just Sora?”

Riku faltered, giving her the quickest of appraisals and knowing a lost battle on-sight. Telling her that he’d only need Sora just for a minute would not go over well. “Alright, come along.”

She smiled. “Thank you,” she said, gracious even when demanding, and accepted Sora’s help up.

Though he was in too much of a rush for further pleasantries, he still thought it worth asking, “How goes training?”

“Sora would know better than I would.”

“I’m happy to report it’s going well,” Sora announced, with a hint of pride in her progress. “We went through basic stances, footwork, and blocking techniques.”

Riku almost lifted an eyebrow. If he was being completely honest with himself, he rather thought they’d spend all day acquainting Kairi with movement... He hadn't missed how difficult it was for her to keep her footing. He began to lead them up to the bough, commending, “Well done. Both of you.”

Sora shot the Princess a quick grin, as though trying to convey, ‘See? What'd I tell you?’

“To matters – you see how the entire horizon is dark?” Riku extended the spyglass, stopping them with it in view. Where the sky met the sea, all was heavily clouded. Sora peered out with a frown.

“Think it's them?”

Kairi's burgeoning self-satisfaction was quashed, and she became tense. She hadn't expected them to come upon danger so soon.

“It must be... But,” Riku handed the spyglass to Sora, “take a look. There are two center points to the storm.”

“What...?” He took it and held it up to observe.

As unobtrusive as she could manage, Kairi interjected, “What does that mean?”

Riku crossed his arms, still looking out at the horizon. “It means they're trying to throw us off. They must be at the core of one of those storms... But they've made a second one.”

Sora was looking to one, then the other. “They know someone is following the storms... They want us to be trapped in one and escape in the other, I suppose...”

“You only just made it out of one of those storms,” Kairi looked up at Riku sharply. “Don't tell me
you're planning to go into one again."

“They're using them as a defence. And now, a trap,” he glanced towards her, expression difficult to read. “... Can you feel Namine from here? Or Roxas?”

Kairi bit her lip. “I'm not sure... She feels closer than she did at Radiant Garden, but it isn't all so exact as that...”

Sora nodded his agreement, to Riku's dismay. He made a considering noise, eyes narrowed at the storm as though he could intimidate them into merging. “... I need to get word to the flank ships... I have to decide with nothing to go on.”

A prospect that was making him feel sick.

He couldn't let this drag on, nor could he come off as incapable. Foolhardy. He couldn't mess this up.

And if he took Kairi into one of those storms... There was already no chance of escaping one of those without casualties, if not loss. Kairi could be one of them.

And it might all be for nothing...

Kairi looked to Sora nervously as he looked through the spyglass one more time.

“It'll be alright...” he looked from one storm to the other, the two of them so widespread and wild that they merged over the water. “I bet they'll be inside whichever one looks more unnatural...”

Riku's stomach still felt like lead, but he tried to come off as confident for Kairi's sake, unaware that Sora was doing the same. “I'll take another look and alter course.”

“Right,” Sora handed him the spyglass and glanced at Kairi. “I think we'll start on sword grips this afternoon.”

Honestly, their rest had done nothing to revitalize her, but she nodded nonetheless. “After you.”

“If that's all you needed, Captain...” Sora was privately eager to leave Riku in peace, only out of uncertainty that he was wanted. Riku had already started searching the horizon to study the storms, unreadable.

“Yes...” he muttered. “Dismissed.”

“Captain,” Kairi gave a little curtsy.

“Hm... we should probably fix that too...”


“Good luck in your training, Your Highness,” Riku lowered the spyglass, looking to the two of them... but his gaze stopped on Sora, lingering at a complete loss. He wanted to say something to him. He couldn't.

“Thank you. Please tell me if anything new arises,” she bade him.

Noticing his stare, Sora smiled at him for all of a second before turning away to guide Kairi back.

Riku watched them go, wondering if Sora was slipping away. It certainly felt as though he was. Something had changed, and now... there was a distance. It was hard to tell how far apart the fissure
put them, but it was undeniably present, and worryingly cold.

He felt... helpless.

And his gut was telling him that *neither* storm boded well, but to let indecision rule him meant death or worse. He had to choose.

He'd end this campaign, get them home... and whatever had gone wrong between Sora and him, Riku would fix it.

They'd chase the storm to the North, and pray.

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Roxas thought it would be harder to stake out Marluxia's room. Now that Xemnas had been appeased, the time he was given to rest and recover was almost gratuitous, and he'd had basically the last twenty-four hours to do with as he pleased. He might've found it suspicious if he hadn't also been glad for it.

He tried not to come off as lurking, if he was to be noticed. Axel and Marluxia passed from the corner of his eye, walking together but not speaking, and Roxas immediately went sneaking off in the direction they'd come from.

Marluxia's room. Namine's cell.

Certain the coast was clear, Roxas crouched by the door. He wanted to let her know gently that he was there instead of startling her. Without too much effort, he concentrated until tiny drops of light bubbled from his fingertips, and began slipping them under the narrow crack of the door.

Namine's head jerked up, hunched over to produce picture after picture, at Marluxia's insistence. She'd been working in complete darkness, unable to even see what she was drawing, but the glow drew her eye.

She started to smile, papers falling away.

Roxas managed to produce a steady stream of them, and in less than a minute, tiny floating lights filled the room like stars. Enthralled, Namine whispered to no one, “They're beautiful...”

The lock clicked, and Roxas ducked inside, shutting it softly. Then he took a moment to admire his handiwork, actually rather pleased both with the lights and the reaction he'd earned – Namine's hands were clasped in delight, pale eyes almost aglow and admiring.

“... They're lovely, Roxas, thank you...”

Modestly, he rubbed the back of his neck. “It's nothing... Really, I'm doing much more complex things now.”

He didn't even need to control them individually, upon letting them go – they hung in the air, and would fade in time. Gingerly, Namine reached out to lightly brush one of the bright dots with a fingertip, surprised to find there was no heat.

“What sort of things?”
"Uh, anything you can think of light doing, probably."

She looked to him earnestly. "That's amazing."

'Amazing' was what worried him most, right now...

"Last night, I was..." Roxas exhaled. "I don't know how to even describe what I did."

Delicately withdrawing her hand, she nodded. "You've been training... I heard about that, but..."

"He talks about me?" Repulsed by the thought of Marluxia keeping an eye on him, Roxas couldn't help but interrupt.

"He knows you have a part to play," Namine confirmed, a little cryptically.

"A... part? In what? This 'becoming whole' plot...?"

"Marluxia doesn't include me in his plans... I honestly don't know what he's doing. But I know that... he wants power," she regarded Roxas seriously. "And that he thinks you may be the key to it."

He liked Xemnas's apparent interest in his progress even less when Marluxia wanted something from him, too. If anyone unnerved him more than the Captain, it was him. "What does any of that have to do with me?"

"... There's something Xemnas needs. I don't know why, but Marluxia thinks he can exploit it. He wants control of the ship." Namine bit her lip. "As far as you're concerned... I only know that your presence, your light, has changed something."

Roxas clenched his fists. "He wanted me to make the night sky bright - so bright it was like daytime. And I did, but it was... it wasn't right. Not like daylight. It was more like I had taken the color out of everything."

The false dawn had looked ill, to him. A weak and sickly version of what it should be.

Namine appeared to be in thought. Roxas didn't like the look she gave him.

"... What is it?"

It took her a moment to settle on words, and when she spoke, it was with a degree of fragility. "... I don't know for sure. But your light, and that you're here now... You're different, Roxas."

"... Different?"

"If you're right, and you were born with Sora... You're not like any of us."

It should have been a good thing. Any and all degrees of separation from the monstrous crew might have been a comfort, weeks ago. "Why should it make a difference?"

"It might mean unusual things for your abilities," Namine thought aloud, twinkling lights gently bobbing down around her. "You may be stronger than they are."

Roxas stared in confusion. Now... He wasn't so sure he wanted to be different from them, after all. Not if it meant he'd be used – to what end? If Xemnas 'needed' something, and intended on putting Roxas into some unknowable situation to get it... What would he have to do? Would he even survive it?
How would being Sora's twin make him *that* important?

“I can't... I don't actually remember, of course...” he faltered, trying to backtrack over his former insistence that they were real brothers, that they *had* to be.

Deep down, he still felt that sense of certainty. He and Sora were connected so completely that they couldn't be anything *but*.

“I don't know if you *are* stronger... But you're important to them.” Namine nibbled the nail of her blackened thumb. “If I knew more...”

“That isn't something your...” he waved a hand at her pages, “can tell you?”

“It's never very clear...” She confessed, despondent.

So it didn't actually matter 'why'. No matter the reason, Roxas was taking part in a game that no one had told him the rules to. Xemnas was toying with his power, getting him into position for something... Marluxia was watching Xemnas, and probably had something in mind to counter him, or usurp him... Saix was at the Captain's beck and call, ready to destroy all of his opponents and probably kill Roxas if he didn't cooperate, Larxene practically served the same function for Marluxia if he wasn't mistaken, and Axel...

Who *knew* where Axel fit into that mess, but Roxas was right not to trust him. He *was* involved, might have been from the very beginning.

“... Well, what do you think I should do, then?”

“I would say to hide the extent of your abilities... but it's too late for that...” Namine went quieter. “Far too late.”

Roxas's stomach sank with dread.

There was really only one thing left that Namine could think of, the only way to possibly save him...

And selfishly, she didn't really want to suggest it.

She would, regardless. She couldn't be that terrible, and she wouldn't... Marluxia would not win out over what was right, and loneliness and Marluxia were one in the same thing, to her thinking.

“... Listen. They have a heading and they'll be docking as soon as they can. Maybe... maybe you should run.”

With Roxas gone, there would be no one left to speak freely to... Axel's opportunities to check in on her were fewer and farther between, and there was no one else. Roxas leaving would be... It would feel like the end of hope. She'd once again know only the dark, and the cold, unending. Waiting was terrible, but it meant there was something ahead of her... Something she could treasure, without anything tangible to hold or plain to view.

Anticipating a visit had gotten her through Marluxia's cruelest bouts, as of late. But she could let that go.

“Wait, where are we headed?” Making port was unexpected; Roxas hadn't even known they were near land. There had been shoals they'd had to coast around, that had been a difficult day with the ship incessantly lurching under their feet... but he didn't realize they had a *destination*. “How do you know I'll get on land?”
“They’re going to be looking for someone – this man,” Namine sought one of the drawings she’d let flutter to the floor, picking it up to show him. Roxas accepted it, holding it up near the glittering lights and narrowing his eyes.

It was a long-haired, sharp-eyed man – one who bore a very strong resemblance to the Captain. Roxas stared at it, perplexed.

“Isn’t this...?”

Namine shook her head. “... He’s the Admiral, of Radiant Garden’s Navy.”

“The Navy...” Finally, something that made sense. “So they kidnap the Admiral of their pursuers...”

“I’m almost certain they’ll dock there,” Namine folded her hands in her lap, looking down. “The Kingdom of Radiant Garden is where I’m from,” she continued softly. “They already forced me to give them information... Explain the layout of the palace, the quickest way there...”

Roxas perked up slightly. “If they’re docking at... Radiant Garden, is it? You could escape, go to your home...”

It wasn’t as though the thought hadn’t occurred to her. Obsessively, longingly.

The shackles around her ankles clinked, like they were reminding her of their very solid presence. “... It’s dangerous to think like that.”

“I could help you,” Roxas quickly became insistent, sure that she’d just provided the answer. “I’m sure they won’t need me for anything, they probably don’t trust me to be in a shore party.”

Namine’s head was starting to spin. She was scared to hope but sure that she could feel it, like a yearning lightness from within. “You... You’d really help me?”

She sounded so breakable. Like this hadn't been the first time she'd seen freedom just beyond her grasp, and after so much struggling she’d made herself forget it was ever there. If Roxas let her down, the disappointment might kill her... Being here for much longer might kill her. Namine would have died from a broken heart long ago, if she’d had one.

Roxas wouldn't take his offer lightly. He couldn't do that to her.

“I will,” he promised seriously. “I swear it.”

Namine was staring, stunned, oblivious to the couple of tears spilling over her cheeks. Roxas stepped forward, noticing and feeling... relief, where there should have been sympathy or concern.

He'd wondered so many times, whether or not he was still capable of crying. If she was.

“... We could do it...” Namine murmured, a little breathlessly.

Roxas glanced down at the manacles. “I could unlock those, or break them, when the time comes.”

“You really think so...?”

Behind Roxas, unseen by either of them, a thin cirrus of wood began to curl out of the floor planks, snaking forward towards his feet.

He was about to answer that he didn't see why not, when something occurred to him. “There’s nothing... enchanted about them, is there?”
“I don't know...” Marluxia sometimes removed them to allow her some movement, but only long enough to prevent bed sores or to allow her to relieve herself. She never saw how; there were keyholes, but no obvious key. She didn't think one even existed.

Why would Marluxia need one, when he had other ways of picking locks open?

Roxas peered at them critically, taking another step forward. “I could try them now, just to practi – aht!”

One of his legs had been yanked out from under him, sending him crashing onto his back, and Namine clapped a hand to her mouth to keep from making a sound. With a strained groan, Roxas struggled to turn over and see what tripped him, utterly winded.

Vines lashed around both legs, twisting their way rapidly up his calves.

The door creaked open.

“Ah,” Marluxia gazed down at him. “I finally catch the sneaking little insect at it.”

With a delighted sound, Larxene caught Marluxia's arm, right at his heels. “Aw, don't tell me you were having some little love affair. That would just be too precious.” She'd said the last words with an audible pout.

Namine sat wide-eyed and rigid in her chair, unable to do anything but keep still. Roxas swore, trying to tug at the tendrils even as flowers and leafy shoots continued to grow from the woodwork. He hardly believed they were real, until his hands started coming away raw and red.

“Plotting, more likely,” Marluxia strode into the room, drifting a hand over Namine's hair. “You've been waiting for a chance to betray me, my darling, haven't you?”

She shook her head quickly, paler than ever. “W-we were only talking, really... He had questions... About his brother...”

“Oh, have you been 'worried'?” Mockingly, Larxene crouched by Roxas. He tried to swipe at her in retaliation, but more vines bound his wrists, thorns cutting through his shirt.

“But you haven't drawn him in days, love...” Delicately picking up the drawing of Ansem, he crooned at Namine, “You know what will happen if you lie to me.”

With a lazy flick of his hand, the vines dragged Roxas upwards, puppet-like, to pin him against one of the walls. Roxas's struggles proved futile.

“I'm not-!” Namine's breath caught, knuckles going white as she watched. “I swear, I'm not... I won't betray you, I wouldn't do that...!”

Larxene laughed, high-pitched, and got to her feet. “Maybe our poor little doll has been lonely.”

“Is that right?” Though he was speaking to Namine, Marluxia's eyes were on Roxas, suspending him at eye level. “Do you need to pay a visit to your garden?”

Namine went cold.

“None of this was her idea,” Roxas snarled. “I picked the lock, she had no choice -”

Before he could say any more to defend her, another sinewy plant stretched over his mouth, gagging him.
“No...” Namine's nails cut into her palms. “I promise, I wasn't doing anything...”

“Larxene, do keep her quiet while I think of what to do with the wretch.” Stepping uncomfortably close to Roxas, Marluxia watched him squirm, a halo of light starting to eat at the vines holding him. As fast as he could burn them away, several more replaced them.

With a grin, Larxene leaned in and slid her hands over Namine's shoulders, crackling with electricity. Namine winced, keeping determinedly silent for fear of worse.

“Hm... Looks like she doesn't have anything to say...” Larxene cooed. “That's how it'll stay, won't it? Not a sound.”

Marluxia drew out the process of considering. “Something lasting... It must be a lesson he cannot possibly forget...”

Namine wanted to protest, watching Marluxia drag a finger down Roxas's cheek, but could only shudder and squeeze her eyes shut. Another volt of electricity stung her.

If only there was anything she could say... She knew he wouldn't kill Roxas, Marluxia wouldn't have done that even if he didn't have value.

Death was a kindness. Death was what came when his victim could suffer no more. Marluxia had taught her that. With manufactured glee, he'd taught her.

Thorns grew around his fingers like talons as Marluxia drew back his hand, the little lights around them starting to fade and blink out of existence. Then he drove them deep into Roxas's shoulder, and all his victim could do was cry out and toss his head, completely bound down to the wall.

A shadow was cast over the room, darkening it more than even the vanishing lights.

“Marluxia.”

Looming in the doorway, Saix was almost a welcome sight. Larxene straightened up, looking over her shoulder at him, and Namine trembled.

“Is there a problem?” His gleaming golden eyes went slowly from person to person, and it was entirely unclear which of them he was most inclined to tear apart if provoked. Marluxia slowly extracted his bloody fingers, and Roxas's teeth cut into the vine.

“Oh of course not...”

“You are given care of one prisoner already,” Saix stared him down. “You do not have authority to give out punishments to any but her.”

Lip curling in displeasure, Marluxia let Roxas drop. His blood streaked on the wall as he fell to the floor in a heap.

“You should keep better watch on the Captain's pets. This one has been spying.”

“He wasn't -” despite her better judgement, Namine tried to defend him. “We weren't doing anything...”

Larxene clamped her hand over Namine's mouth and shocked her, making her twitch wildly and tear up.

Stepping into the room, Saix hauled Roxas up by the scruff, impassive. “I am well aware of his
trespassing habits.”

Roxas didn't fight his grip, realizing he'd gone from bad to worse. He'd almost definitely be killed for knowing about Namine, unless Xemnas really thought he was worth keeping alive for something.

“Axel has taken ownership of this one's crimes,” Saix sounded disgusted, only holding back on the desire to maul him as per the Captain's wishes. Xemnas needed him intact, after all.

If only 'intact' didn't also mean 'impertinent'.

“Take him to Axel, then,” Marluxia snapped testily. “And tell him he'd better do a good job on this one. I won't be cleaning up after him again.”

Saix growled. “I do not carry messages for you.”

Larxene stifled a laugh and dug in her nails, a steady stream of shocks paining Namine to the point of uncontrollable tears.

Roxas felt cold in his chest, certain there was some kind of code to Marluxia's message. Whatever punishment Axel had in store for him... Maybe it wouldn't be anything better than what Marluxia would concoct. He was in some kind of collusion with Marluxia and Larxene; his spying and Namine's information as good as confirmed that. Whatever the reason, that made him something that this pair of sadists wanted in their corner...

And that meant Axel might be more of a danger to him than anyone. No one else had wormed their way so far under his skin. No one on this vessel knew Roxas quite the way Axel did.

That look on Axel's face, when he'd threatened to kill him... That unfeeling fire in his eyes...

“As for her...” Saix's pitiless gaze lingered on Namine. “She is your charge. Do what you like with her.”

As Saix shut the door behind him, carrying Roxas with him, the last of his lights went out. Both green and blue eyes lit up like stars, all the more pronounced in the dark left behind.

“... What a shame,” Larxene sighed. “He could have been fun.”

Namine just tried to keep still. The darkness felt... so much more stifling.

“No matter,” Marluxia dismissed, “It will be a test for Axel.”

It was no secret that Axel had some sort of investment in Roxas, perhaps beyond that of maneuvers and power struggles... Perhaps this could prove itself to be an opportunity. A chance to see whether Axel's priorities lay with them, or the whelp under his wing.

He did so hope it was with them. There was much he desired from Axel, and his loyalty was only a perk.

“For now...” he rounded on Namine. Larxene removed her hand and flexed her fingers, leaving the girl shuddering. “What shall we do with this little traitor...”

The walls suddenly pulsed with life, Marluxia's tiny cabin becoming hot and damp as everything disappeared under writhing, flowering plant life. Namine shrank in on herself, spidery little electrical burns drying out her lips.

“... I didn't betray you... I wouldn't...”
Marluxia leaned in close, petals falling into her lap. He tilted her chin up and asked with cold calm, “What did you tell him?”

Namine knew what was coming. There was no avoiding her punishment, and no lessening it. Marluxia would tell her otherwise, but years of experience had ingrained a different story.

Privately, she held firm. At least there was nothing to gain from being honest, now.

“He had questions, about his brother... Th-that's all... He just wants to know where he is, I tried to explain it doesn't work like that...”

Verbally, he stepped on her rambling excuses. “He's come here before, hasn't he?”

She didn't know how to deny that. Couldn't, unless she wanted Marluxia to suspect everything she said. “... O-once...”

Not allowing her to break eye contact, he hissed, “You're not lying to me again, are you?”

Namine’s back teeth bit hard into her cheek.

“... I never lied to you.”

“But you did not tell me he was here, you wicked thing...” Marluxia's fingers started to dig in, and she winced.

“Nn-... It... It didn't seem important... He didn't take anything...”

He smiled, tone icy. “Does the boy know what you are, or are you keeping secrets from him, too?”

Witch.

An echo, like poison, lingered. A murmur on the edge of her subconscious. Her eyes shone, close to tearing up again.

“... All he knows is that I draw... That's all...”

“Because you know he'd never come back, if he knew...” Marluxia almost whispered, clearly enunciating every word. “He'd learn that this is the only place for you...”

Larxene bit down on a laugh, watching the show. Namine's gaze fell.

With the tiny glimmer of hope she'd cultivated crushed underfoot, Marluxia's demeanor changed entirely. He stroked her hair, suddenly soothing. “If you've been lonely, my dear, why not tell me?”

She flinched like a wounded animal, lip trembling.

She'd known this was coming.

She knew begging would do her no good.

Yet all the same, she weakly mumbled, “Please don't...”

“If it's company you wish...” Marluxia drew the flora up out of the floor beside her, and it began to take a familiar shape.

Rose branches surged up rapidly, twisted around each other until they took the shape of legs, a torso,
arms. A head, from which long, burgundy-red petals draped in layers to the puppet's 'shoulders'. Lilac blooms and trailing wisteria exploded all over the body to form a gown edged with lace-like hemlock, and a pink heart-shaped bulb rested like a broach on its breast.

Namine shut her eyes tightly.

They were never supposed to know what she looked like. As long as she'd been Namine's precious secret, she was safe. But she couldn't control what she drew, and her own hands had betrayed her again and again. There was only so much pain Namine had been able to bear before she answered all their questions about the girl in her drawings.

They knew everything. Who she was, what she looked like, how nothing in the world mattered to Namine more than her...

The thing placed its thorny hand on her shoulder, two forget-me-nots taking the place of eyes and soft pink petals becoming lips.

Her crown of lotus blossomed out of the red.

Namine angled her head away, her voice choked. “I didn't mean to keep secrets...”

Marluxia hushed her. “Why don't we leave you two alone...”

“Please don't...” She tried to shrink away from the thorny hand, that much closer to tears; the insult of her hurt more than the sharpness.

This mockery of what she wanted, who she loved, this parody of reuniting... Marluxia saved this particular punishment for Namine's serious transgressions, or for his most sadistic moods. That was why she knew.

There was no escaping the ship. And there was no escaping her.

This empty shell designed to look like Kairi. Namine's equivalent, for what really made them differ? They both masqueraded as something like a princess. Namine's princess. They were both empty and barely alive. They were pretend.

And all the gentleness the floral puppet would show her was barbed, would draw blood and tears alike. Much like Namine.

This was what she deserved. Fake human contact for a fake human girl.

And the only trace of Kairi she would know for the rest of her life.

“But this is what you wanted...” With a nod to Larxene, Marluxia opened the door for them both as the puppet began to circle Namine. It danced around her, silent but for the rustle of leaves.

“Have fun with your doll, princess,” Larxene crooned, and strut out the door with an air of amusement. Marluxia closed the door, but didn't go far.

He wouldn't go far, not for as long as it took to break her.

The shackles felt that much heavier as Namine tried to curl up and hide in her hands. The puppet remained inescapably close, sharp hands reaching out to her. Brushing her hair back, stroking her cheek.

The thorns scratched and stung, but didn't linger in one place. She, the thing, never touched for very
long, and then she'd draw back to circle her again, dancing, staring with blue-petal eyes.

Empty and unblinking.

“You're not real...” Namine mumbled to her hands. “You're not real... You're not real...”

It became her mantra until the words made no sense, and she stopped knowing whether she was talking to the fake Kairi, made of nothing but flowers and thorns, or herself, made of nothing but memory and a wish.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Everyone, the plot. The plot is totally happening. THE PLOT EXISTS THIS IS NOT A DRILL.

As anyone who follows our tumblr (or read last week's WIFKY chapter) may know, Muffin is participating in NaNoWriMo this year and exclusively working on fanfiction. Any support you guys could throw his way would be super freaking amazing, because writing is roughly a thousand times easier with responses from a wicked cool community. SO MANY THANKS to everyone who's been commenting (especially repeat commenters, you're amazing and we love you) and leaving kudos!

Saix held Roxas just-slightly too high off the ground, dragging him off to Axel's quarters without a break in his even stride. Roxas's footing was impossible to achieve, and he nearly twisted his ankle in the attempt to find it.

Pain was outside the scope of his tunnel vision. He was still bleeding from his shoulder, but Roxas was barely conscious of it anymore. He was afire with panic and fury, more emotion than he could remember experiencing in ages and so convincingly real that he forgot he couldn't actually feel it.

He didn't fear for his life anymore, he was beyond that. He wanted answers.

Without so much as a knock, Saix threw open Axel's door. Roxas glimpsed red of a darker hue than expected.

Axel raised an eyebrow at the two of them, his shirt abandoned to the corner and cleaning blood off his hands. He'd only just returned to his room after slaughtering and plucking the last of their chickens for tonight, which was among his least-favorite tasks to be set.

He hadn't been earning himself any favors, as of late, and he rather thought Saix was to blame in part.

“... You should have written. I'd have had a welcome party prepared.”

Saix thrust Roxas forward, and he struggled not to fall. “This one was found in Marluxia's quarters. You have answered for his thievery once before. I'd rather thought you'd learned not to let him wander where he shouldn't be.”

Roxas jerked further out of Saix's grasp, throwing him a hateful glare. “I wasn't stealing anything.”

Wonderful. So he was in for another whipping.

“And here I thought he was training,” Axel's eyes narrowed. “With the Captain's supervision.”

“I was,” Roxas hastily looked to him. “He gave me time to recover after last night and I came down to -”

“Marluxia seems keen to know you've punished him accordingly,” Saix ignored them both and went
on, not once breaking eye contact. “The Captain will find the company you keep these days most interesting.”

... He recognized that for what it was. Saix thought he'd found a new mutiny to join.

And he wasn't, strictly speaking, wrong.

Saix turned on his heel to leave, and Axel swept forward to shut the door. Roxas followed him warily with his eyes.

“... You have no idea what kind of position you put me in,” Axel turned to him, unimpressed.

Roxas narrowed his eyes in return. If Axel was going to punish him, he could do it after explaining himself and all else. “So, when were you planning to tell me about her?”

“About the time you broke into Marluxia's quarters,” he drawled. “What a coincidence.”

“That sounds very likely,” Roxas scowled.

“What were you even doing in there? Wait... let me guess. Talking to Namine.”

He narrowed his eyes right back at Roxas, and the indignation that stirred wiped any atmosphere of danger from his head. That Axel had the nerve to act like he'd been 'inconvenienced'...

“What not?” Roxas shot at him. “So far she's the only one who thinks I'm worth telling anything to.”

Axel thoughtlessly dragged a hand through his hair, tossing the bloodied rag aside; there were undoubtedly still traces left behind, and now it was in his hair. Just perfect. “… You don't realize the danger you put everyone in. Her, too.”

Roxas tried not to let the slight stab deter him, though he knew Axel was undeniably right. Something would happen to Namine, for this, and he didn't know how things could get worse... but he was sure they could.

“What was I supposed to do? She's in there, in the dark, shackled to the floor. And she knew something about Sora!”

Irritated, Axel went to sit. “I told you, didn't I? That I'd find out about him. Full disclosure.”

“But you didn't find out anything since you made that deal with me.”

“Obviously,” he scrutinized Roxas, gaze molten. “And she'll be under tighter lock and key, after this. I'll be lucky to find out anything else from Namine ever again.”

Roxas bristled. “Then we'll be even.”

“You want even?” Axel drew himself up, and even though Roxas had forgotten how tall he really was, he didn't move. “I've been getting close to Marluxia for a long time now. I've had more opportunities to get information out of her and I've taken them, without getting caught like an amateur.” He advanced on him. “If there was any hope of ever being whole again, you just went and lost it for us both.”

He would have been less intimidating if he'd shouted. In spite of him, Roxas stood his ground. “Information I doubt you ever intended to share. Because you've been content to keep me in the dark since I became this, so you can move me around like a piece in your game just like everyone else on this damned ship!”
Axel let the accusation sink in, studying Roxas as he loomed over him.

Then a slow, cold smirk spread over his face. “You think you'd rather be a player?”

Maintaining his stance was getting harder, and Roxas tried not to let Axel unsettle him. “... It's that or be used. The Captain wants something from me, Marluxia's after me because of that, and you... I don't know what you plan to do with me in the end, but I can bet it's not a daring escape.”

“All I want is to feel like I have a heart, again...” one long finger tilted Roxax's chin, “... and there are times you almost do that for me.”

Roxas lost the thread of his argument, thrown off. Axel was looking down at him so intently...

But he couldn't tell what was in his face.

“... You want to play? You'll have to start by choosing a side. And to make that easy on you, I'll throw you one free fact,” Axel drew away from him. “Xemnas wants to live forever.”

Shaking off that sensation, like the hollowness in his chest had been straining, Roxas raised his eyebrows. “That's not already part of the deal?”

“Do you really think being whole again wouldn't cost us something? If we regain our hearts, we get the bonus of mortality,” Axel turned to return to his cot. “Our Captain says we're looking for a way to become human. But we're not.” He sank onto the mattress. “That'd interfere with what he really wants, and that's to rule the seas, forever.”

“... Where does that leave the rest of the crew?” Roxas backed up to lean into the wall.

“Chasing lies.” Axel leaned back, studying a stained hand. “I've known for a while. Namine, of course. And, for just as long, I was planning a mutiny with Saix.”

Roxas blinked. Saix? That seemed beyond fathom.

“But things have changed,” Axel concluded with a scowl.

“Saix planned to mutiny against the Captain?” Roxas gave him a strange look.

“‘Planned,’” he pointedly out darkly. “He's not mine, anymore, Xemnas has him convinced that we can have our cake and eat it, too. So... the question is, where do you stand?”

Roxas was quiet for a moment, staring from the floor to Axel's face. His expression was neutral, meeting Roxas's eyes, and for all he'd ever said about 'pretending'...

Axel was a monster who couldn't feel. Roxas told himself that, and let himself believe this couldn't hurt Axel.

“... I already know what I need to be whole.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Sora.”

There was no need to confirm that. “This is only happening because we're apart...”

“Did Namine tell you that, or is that your best guess?”

If Axel had told the truth about telling him everything he heard about Sora, then Roxas was justified in his reluctance to share what Namine had said. He reveled in the idea that he knew something Axel
didn't, and couldn't ever know, now that he couldn't see her on his own.

But who knew for sure if he'd been honest... If Axel had really just made a leap of logic, or if he'd known all along.

In either case, Roxas was inclined to just be truthful. Lies could only get him more lies, or the wrong information entirely.

“She told me I was human while I was with him.”

“... Huh,” Axel murmured, something rippling through his expression. He hadn't known.

“If I'm with him again soon... maybe that means it won't be too late for me.”

“... So we find Sora. We know he's on a ship, or was.”

Roxas missed the mention of 'we', thinking of Namine's encouragement to run at the next port. There wasn't a chance he'd mention her advice. “That's something I have to do.”

“Assuming you get a chance,” he pointed out.

“That's why there's no point picking a side.”

“On the contrary,” came his rebuttal. “You pick a side, you pick your allies.”

'Allies' – it was actually kind of pathetic to try to hope for any, now that Namine was locked up tighter. He muttered, “No one is going to help me.”

“I've been helping you,” Axel narrowed his eyes.

“You kidnapped me,” he snapped, accusing. “This is about leaving. Being with Sora, and maybe not going back to where I was, but somewhere.”

“It's always gonna come back to that, with you...” Axel had the gall to sound exasperated. “Yes, I kidnapped you. You'd have been killed if I hadn't and I wanted you. But I kept you safe on this ship. I've taken whippings for you. And right now, I should be cauterizing your mouth shut but I'm not. And I won't.”

Roxas pressed himself a little harder against the door. “Am I supposed to be grateful?”

“You're supposed to recognize who you can trust on this ship, and who you can't. If you're choosing your own side... you've got nothing.”

“I'm supposed to choose your side?” He sounded derisive. “Does that even exist?”

“You'd be surprised what my side has.”

For all the certainty Axel had in saying that, Roxas was no less full of skepticism and spite. “From what I can see, your side involves playing at being on everyone else's – including mine – to serve no one but yourself.”

“Seems similar to yours,” he swung his legs over the side of his bed. “You had questions, didn't you? About Namine?”

“I do,” he admitted shortly, “but first I want to know what you're planning to do with me now, if not mutilate me somehow.”
Roxas's hand was on the doorknob, but he concealed that with his body. He could probably fight Axel, if he turned on him... But using his power when not for easing the suffering of an imprisoned girl felt like pandering to Xemnas.

He'd run, if he had to... To where, he wasn't sure, but he'd bolt until he had a solid plan. Maybe he could appeal to the Captain and be taken out of Axel's so-called care...

If only he knew what the real lesser of two evils was.

“I'm figuring that out,” Axel leaned forward. “I have to show that I've punished you, somehow.”

“By the Captain's standards, or Marluxia's?” He hoped for the former.

“Marluxia's.”

Roxas swallowed. “... Don't think you could get away with chaining me to the floor.”

Axel looked like he might laugh at him. “That's not punishment, that's just how Marluxia keeps her from throwing herself overboard.”

He bristled. “You want me to believe he keeps her there for her own protection?”

“No,” Axel did laugh, then, a bitter sort of sound. “Definitely not. Who do you think drove her to that point?”

The realization was a little delayed, but it dawned on Roxas what he was really saying, and his expression darkened. Namine had no other escape route but to drown, or wait for Roxas to come to her rescue...

And he didn't even know whether or not that was possible, now.

“No, Marluxia likes cruelty,” Axel went on. “The chains aren't to keep her under control, or to punish her – he has a more hands-on approach to both. They're to keep her weak, and alive. Useful.”

His throat felt tight. “Why didn't that happen to me?”

To Axel, the answer was obvious; Roxas was of more use to Xemnas if he was powerful. But, given that he didn't know why, he just shrugged. “Because no one knew you were like us until I'd already staked a claim? Or maybe they just thought Marluxia had enough on his plate.”

Nonetheless, Roxas's instincts screamed at him to put distance between himself and Axel. He gripped the doorknob tighter, in lieu of grabbing his torn-open shoulder. “So, now what? What's 'Marluxia's standard'?”

“Hn... I could brand you again,” Axel smirked. “You seemed to like it the first time.”

That... came as a surprise. Was he planning on conferring with Roxas about his own punishment, then? Was he interested in actually reprimanding him, or just making it look as though he had?

A branding seemed... tame. Roxas's eyebrows furrowed. “You think that would be enough?”

“If you act traumatized enough. Maybe.”

“... Where?” He doubted the Captain would care how he ended up burned, even if it was visible... It wasn't as though it'd impede his light tricks, and those were all he actually cared about.
“Somewhere Marluxia could see. That made it look like you were in danger…” Axel got up from the bed, approaching him. Not quite so chary, Roxas held still, even as one of Axel's hands wrapped loosely around his throat. He tensed as though to jerk away; maybe he wasn't afraid, but he still had a sense of self-preservation.

“… He can't take the heat like you can. Pain, sure, but he never liked this trick,” Axel looked from his neck to his Roxas's face. “So? What'll it be?”

He didn't answer right away. “We've been here before. You were threatening to kill me last time…”

“Burn you from the inside out,” Axel recalled unabashedly. “If you prefer, I could still kill you. Quick and easy. But I'd rather not.”

“How do I know this won't kill me?” He already knew this would be nothing like the brand he gave his leg...

“I guess you'd have to trust me.”

He was about to spit another comeback about how much trust Axel deserved, but he changed his mind... slightly.

Better Axel start earning it, than the two of them arguing again.

“You'll have to work a lot harder from now on, if you want me to trust you.”

“Hm.” The warm hand slipped away. “You think you're worth it?”

“The other players seem to think I'm worth something,” Roxas pointed out coolly. “Are you going to get in line with them, or...?”

“There's a difference. They don't need to trust you in return.”

He started to grin, certain Axel would pick up on what he was offering. “There are benefits to trusting me.”

“I'll bet,” Axel looked him over, one inch at a time. “But I don't.”

Even though they were already close, Roxas took a step towards him, voice lowering. “You said I can make you feel like you have a heart... I like making you feel that way.”

If that weren't also his bargaining chip, he never would have wanted to admit that. But, despite the dance the two of them had been doing from the start... Axel warmed him, in every sense he knew of and in some ways still foreign.

It looked to him like Axel had an easier time inventing a heart when they were together, and that was... something. But his smirk right then lacked anything at all – it was just a pull of muscles, stretching his mouth.

“That's sweet, but I've been at this for a long time. That's an easy lie to tell.”

“I could say the same to you,” Roxas countered.

“Yeah, you could,” he shrugged.

“But, if you're not lying, I know that feeling won't work nearly as well without trust.”
“That's still not proof that I can.”

“What kind of proof are you asking for?” Roxas demanded. “And while we're at it, what proof do I have to trust you on?”

“I volunteer information,” Axel immediately began counting off on his fingers. “I'm practically consulting with you about how to keep you out of Marluxia's vines. I've bargained with you when you've been in a position of total powerlessness.” He raised an eyebrow. “And in return, you snitch on me to get me punished and sneak into rooms without letting me know. I'm a pirate, and I've proven I'm more trustworthy than you.”

“That's not a guarantee that you won't turn on me when the time comes. Keeping me alive up 'til now still had some benefit to you, as long as I was on the ship, but what about letting me go?” If Roxas could count on anything about Axel, it was his greed... And letting go of treasure wasn't something he'd ever do willingly.

“Maybe I'm hoping I'll be whole by then. Either I won't care anymore, or...” Axel trailed off, the meaning in it unclear.

“If you aren't, though, will you stop me?” Roxas asked, although he was certain he'd just say 'no'. That was the other thing he could expect from Axel. Lies.

Axel looked away from him, but it didn't seem to be out of guilt. He couldn't feel guilt, anyway. His gaze was aimed somewhere above Roxas's head, and it might have been contemplation in his eyes.

“... Might ask to go with you.”

Roxas's stomach flipped as though the rug had been pulled out from under him, and didn't know what to say. A blunt 'yes' had been... unlikely, but still conceivable. He might've had a response, to that.

That... That hadn't been expected.

“... But honestly, my focus in becoming whole,” Axel, oblivious to Roxas's shock, went on. “What happens after that, with you? I'll think about after, or when we find Sora.”

He had to say something. Axel hadn't won him over, not just like that. “... I still don't know what kind of proof I can give you. I doubt my word's any good. Not even sure I believe that.”

“Start by telling me the truth,” Axel backed off of him. “How long have you known about Namine?”

“... Not all that long,” Roxas confessed, after a second of deliberation. “The last time I went to bed with you, I had only met her a day or two before.”

“And you talked about Sora...” Which was a little irksome. Namine hadn't told him anything new, on that front... But she'd always shown a certain reluctance, in telling Axel anything. He always thought the only reason she had to speak to him at all was to alleviate the torturous loneliness, and Axel had exploited that with ease.

When it came to Sora, there had been nothing to tell. Only to show. So he'd thought, anyway.

“She was...” Roxas hesitated, “... drawing him.”

“Drawing him doing anything? Any indication where he is?” Axel questioned. “As far as I knew,
she hadn't, but maybe she told you more.”

“... Uh, no... Just him,” he shook his head. “She didn't know who he was until I told her.”

“Shame,” Axel frowned. “And she thinks he'll make you human...”

Roxas nodded, mulling over the possibility of telling him the way Namine had explained. Her description of how he'd come into existence as Sora's brother... He didn't think he should tell anyone, particularly if it made him 'special' somehow.

“... Anything else?”

He decided to keep that secret. “Probably nothing you don't already know. The longer I'm away from him, the more I'll forget what feeling is like... And if she draws him again, it might mean his future will impact the ship's...”

Axel showed no reaction, but his mind raced.

He was sure he hadn't forgotten what it was like to feel... but, now that he thought about it, he'd mostly forgotten why he'd stopped. What made him this way. Axel couldn't quite recall anything but this existence, searching and yearning...

Did he remember emotion? Or was he just remembering the last time he'd faked it? Was every instance of a forced smile once-more-removed from the real thing?

“... And you like that you make me feel,” Axel murmured. “Or something like it.”

Even pretending had been... so much harder, once. Was that real, or had Axel just convinced himself it was?

“I don't blame you for not believing me, but I do...” Roxas watched his conflict without being able to interpret it, and suddenly remembered. “There was one other thing Namine said.”

“Hn...?” Axel looked up at him.

“She said...” Roxas balked; how had she phrased it? “That you're changing somehow, and she thinks it has something to do with me...”

Axel's expression went somewhat slack, uncertain what to think.

... Then it was real? Which begged the question - what was Roxas doing to him?

“How about that,” he glanced away.

Roxas shrugged. “I'm not sure what it even means...”

“She's vague,” Axel muttered. “It might be the only defiance she has.”

“Hm. That's just what she told me, anyway...” Roxas felt a little lame, not sure what he'd expected. Perhaps a response, or no response at all... Maybe even mockery, at the insinuation.

What didn't surprise him was that Axel approached again and kissed him, but he was somehow still caught unprepared. Roxas had to crane his neck, hanging onto him for balance.

Axel pulled him close, and wondered if this was the change.
Treasure wasn't what he wanted, it just... filled a tiny part of the void. But being whole felt more unattainable all the time, like a distant dream made up by a cruel Captain.

Maybe, inadvertently, his priority had shifted. Maybe _Roxas_ embodied the goal.

Maybe _Roxas_ was all he wanted, anymore.

He pulled away from the kiss, honestly conflicted. _Roxas_ stepped away, back meeting the door again just to see Axel's face.

“... We should figure out your punishment... Before Marluxia shows up at my door, or something...” Axel was only half-listening to himself, more lost in thought than he wanted to let on.

_Roxas_ almost reached for the doorknob again. “If you think the brand will work...”

Axel knew that it would, but he didn't want to just... _do_ it. He healed better now, to be sure, but he wouldn't recover from a burn like that overnight. No matter what _Roxas_ was to him, Axel would lose him completely if he hurt him badly enough. “Could warm you up a little.”

There was a reflexive little stir in _Roxas_ 's gut, reminded of the last time Axel ‘warmed him up’. “How are you proposing to do that?”

“However you want,” he purred. “Whatever it takes to make you like it.”

“Liking this one might be too ambitious...” Nonetheless, _Roxas_ pulled Axel down to kiss him again, hands wrapping around his biceps, wanting to show that he could push him away if he wanted.

Axel parted _Roxas_ 's lips, hands running down his sides, and he was more than happy to welcome the heat of his mouth. Curiously, though, Axel wasn't claiming or overwhelming him; he was teasing, gently goading _Roxas_ with the tip of his tongue. The pressure of his lips was still firm and hot, but he was inviting _Roxas_ to take as many liberties as he wished, and he almost didn't know what to do with the freedom apart from pulling Axel down closer to take control.

Deliberately, Axel melted into the kiss with a purr, and _Roxas_ pushed him back a step. Intriguingly, he moved without a fight, and _Roxas_ gained confidence at the lack of resistance. He started to urge him back towards the bed.

It hadn't occurred to him yet, what Axel was doing. It didn't click until he sank on the bed, and gave _Roxas_ an inviting look.

His eyes widened. He was letting _Roxas_ dominate.

_Roxas_ had never been given this much _control_ before...

Bringing one leg up onto the bed, _Roxas_ shifted to straddle his lap, arousal like fire through his veins.

“Maybe you'll get _something_ out of this,” Axel murmured, running a hand up his chest.

_Roxas_ grinned, but a part of him was helplessly uncertain – he knew how to tease, but not that much more.

As seconds passed, Axel tilted his head back a little, prompting, “Well? I'm letting you take what you want... Treasure notwithstanding.”

“... Don't laugh,” _Roxas_ implored quietly.
“I won’t.”

“I know plenty about tempting men to want me...” Even as he said so, his fingers trailed from his hips to his thighs. “But...”

Axel caught on. “Not what to do with them, once they do?”

He reddened. “It seems simpler than it is...”

“Start by kissing me again.”

“That, I can do...” Leaning forward on his knees, he met Axel's lips again and was coaxed immediately into taking. This much, he didn't need help to understand, boldly sweeping his mouth.

Axel felt up his chest, avoiding his throat – he intended on working him up to the burn – when they were harshly interrupted. A bell, loudly clanging on deck. A summons.

Now. Of all times.

Roxas broke the kiss but had yet to pull away, wanting nothing less. Axel's expression twisted in displeasure.

“... We're being called.”

“You sure they want us?” Roxas frowned, knowing full well what that bell meant but wondering if they could somehow squirm out of it.

“Wish I wasn't,” Axel groused, his cock having been roused by the beginnings of their play. “... We'll come back to this.”

Sitting back, Roxas's hand went to his throat, reluctance overpowering lust. “Does it need to be now...?”

“He'll see you unharmed, if I don't.”

Nerves had returned, and it was like being doused in cool water. “So much for working up to it...”

“... Sorry,” Axel said, and meant it. “I'll do it quick.”

“I'd like it if that was more comforting...”

Hesitantly, Roxas let his hand drop, no longer guarding himself. Axel's hand heated up, and wrapped around his throat.

It felt like he'd just taken it off smoldering coals. Roxas tried not to be as tense as he felt inside, all of his breath stuck somewhere near his larynx... especially as it started to scorch.

Axel concentrated, ignoring the acrid, smoky smell of burning flesh and the sizzling sound. Roxas experienced it as a taste and the tiny crackling noise as fear, before the pain truly hit him – Axel's hand was taken away and Roxas seized him, floored by the excruciating burn and tipping into his chest. Hastily, Axel's other arm hooked around him tightly.

Weakly, Roxas wheezed, like breathing was just too much for him. His eyes stung badly, vision blurred.

“... I'll make this up to you,” Axel muttered, urged to say something, and hated the sense ringing
through his awareness. He felt like he'd just done something he shouldn't have.

That was stupid; if he hadn't, Marluxia would cast him aside and do worse to Roxas...

Roxas didn't say anything, only held onto Axel tighter. He couldn't think of anything but the way his skin seared, instinctively drawn to touch the tender burn but knowing better.

“... We have to be up on deck.”

“Yes...” Roxas was hushed. It took considerable effort to pull back.

“Want help?”

Glancing up at him, he tried to ask several things without words, but eventually just agreed. Axel wound an arm under Roxas to lift him, half-carrying him along to the door.

Roxas pushed one thought through his clouded mind. This would at least look like a convincing punishment.

Axel aided him all the way up to the deck, the rest of the crew having already congregated. Xigbar was resting on the railings with nothing to fear from gravity, idly twirling a pistol, while others waited with less patience – Zexion stood between Vexen and Lexaeus with crossed arms, all three of them looking for all the world as though they had better things to be doing.

He rather expected to be struck down for their lateness, verbally if not otherwise, but Xemnas was merely looking out at the deck below, Saix close enough at hand to toy with his hair. He was remaining very still to allow it, looking more than ever like a pet.

Very softly, Axel hissed, “He'll get a good look at you, at least that's guaranteed...”

From across the deck, Marluxia had indeed spotted them, and smirked in satisfaction over his state. Roxas's weak groan was meant to be some kind of acknowledgment.

“At last,” Xemnas located the last of his crew, and hardly needed to raise his voice to be heard. “Listen well.”

Luxord paused mid-drink with one hand halfway up Demyx's shirt, and Larxene tilted an ear Xemnas's way while keenly watching Roxas, bow-lips pleasurably curled.

Xemnas only spoke when everyone was silent, even the night air considerately still. “For centuries, we have been adrift. The task we set ourselves has been insurmountable. The answers, evasive. We have sought the means to be more than what we are, and that has taken its toll. We have stooped to whatever means necessary for food, gold, information... And even when, at last, we thought we had found an endless resource, knowledge proved itself tethered to time. Still, we have had to wait.”

Everything warranted a speech, with Xemnas... Axel fought not to roll his eyes.

“... But the time to take the first step has come.”

Xigbar lifted his head, actually showing some interest. Saix shot a faint smirk in Axel's direction.

His eyes narrowed sharply.

Roxas's head had cleared slightly as he began to heal, already, and he'd managed to hear the tail end. Axel was intent, dissecting the Captain's words and trying to figure out what was actually going on.
“Tonight, we dock, and we raid,” Xemnas swept out an arm towards the horizon, land within view even through the cover of night. “We will take what we need, and destroy what we do not. And then, we set sail for the Isle of Oblivion.”

Radiant Garden. Roxas stared out at the shapes, not so far away, and thought about what Namine said. He wondered if Axel knew.

“Only I know what we seek, and only I know the way to Oblivion. This is how it will remain,” Xemnas met Marluxia’s eyes. His expression was mostly neutral, but Marluxia was unable to keep a touch of smugness out of it. Daintily sitting upon a barrel behind him, Larxene covered her mouth and her giggles.

“And when we sail away from that isle, we shall be closer to having our hearts than ever before... Assuming we do not leave successful, and whole,” Xemnas proclaimed.

A *crack* rang through the air as Xigbar fired off a celebratory shot into the air, Luxord drinking to that as a few deep cheers and calls of approval went through the crew.

Marluxia’s lips curled into another smirk, and he slanted his eyes towards Axel.

“I have arranged a feast in celebration,” Xemnas announced. “Eat well, and be prepared. Await the signal.” He turned, and beckoned Saix to follow as he went to his quarters. Xaldin cheered again at the mention of a feast, getting a huge arm around Demyx, while Zexion silently led the trio below deck. Demyx only lamented the loss of his presence for a second, too pleased over the possibility of food and drink.

He had an easier time with raids when he was tipsy. At least he would probably be left on the ship – he was more useful by the water.

Separate from the celebration, Axel muttered to Roxas, “Can you make it back to my quarters?”

“I think so,” Roxas replied quietly. “It's... already a little better...”

“I didn't lock the door. Best lie down, I'll meet you there,” Axel had met Marluxia's gaze, and wasn't looking away. Roxas took a second to discern where he was looking; he thought it might have been at Larxene, as she lowered herself from the barrel and stretched out her fingers. Electricity crackled between them, forming a ball of sparks that she flicked into the sky over the side of the ship. But no, it wasn't at her – Marluxia brushed his hair back with a flurry of petals, and he was staring straight back.

“... Meeting with Marluxia first?”

Axel nodded. Roxas narrowed his eyes slightly, wishing he wouldn't.

But he was playing the game. Telling him not to was useless, at this stage. Roxas turned to lope off below deck, and Axel made his way over to the pair as though ignoring Roxas entirely.

“Hope you changed your locks,” he greeted.

“I'll be adding more security measures, to be sure,” Marluxia replied smoothly, and his eyes glittered. “You should keep the boy on a leash. You clearly have no control of him.”

A Saix related jibe, how almost-clever.
“My pet doesn't learn anything in chains.”

Rounding Marluxia, Larxene walked her fingers up Axel's arm. “Maybe you need help teaching him,” she purred.

“I mean it's been a better move to let him roam,” Axel clarified coolly. “Let him figure things out. I can get more out of him that way.”

“And risk much more,” Marluxia folded his arms. “Saix interrupted this time, but don't expect me to return the toy in one piece if I discover him sneaking about again.”

“He might not be relevant by then.” Axel lowered his voice. “Has Namine talked to you much about Sora?”

He knew she hadn't. Namine wouldn't have told him a single thing about Sora unless she was asked, and none of them had deemed him relevant to their goals or figured out why he might be.

“The discarded prisoner? I questioned her about her drawings, but she knew very little about why. I made sure that was the truth...” Marluxia's gaze strayed, as though calling a fond memory to mind.

To keep playing the two of them and keep Marluxia complacent, Axel had to put Namine in the line of fire. “Roxas was told otherwise. He may be the key to humanity.”

He didn't specify it was Roxas's humanity at stake. Larxene's eyes widened.

“Why, that little lying witch.” She seized Axel's arm sharply. “Are you sure about that?”

“Roxas was mortal before they were separated. Sora made all the difference.”

Marluxia's eyebrows raised, not yet having a visible reaction to the news of Namine lying to him. “This may only be another version of Xemnas's plan to extend to own life.”

“Either way... It's something we didn't know,” Axel knocked Larxene's hand off him and started to turn away.

“I will question Namine about this...” Marluxia murmured. “If she's up to talking at the moment.”

Larxene laughed, short and piercing. Axel ignored an uncomfortable something in his chest, walking away.

He had to return to Roxas, go back to his quarters...

But he also needed a word with Saix, if only he could see him before the raid began.

“Orcus was growing all the more enraged by Sora's presence at every meeting, and only tempered his venom due to the presence of royalty. Kairi had given no quarter in the argument that she should sit in as the Captain and his First Mate discussed the most recent developments, and for a change it had not been Riku to fight her on it. Such topics did not befit a lady of the court, but Kairi cared for
delicacies as little as she cared for the first weevil she found in her tack.

Living as a sailor meant she could be treated as one... insofar as she was also the princess, and could invite herself to discussions whenever she saw fit. Orcus stood no chance.

It was for the better, as far as Riku was concerned, as Orcus would have undoubtedly drawn his blade on Sora long ago if not for Kairi.

The Captain was leaning over his map, trying to chart the route the Ship That Never Was could be taking, if it turned out they weren't following the right storm. Though, at the moment, they weren't following any storm at all.

Orcus, without his say-so, had told the crew to sail straight between the two storms until he could convene with the Captain. To say Riku was furious about it would sell it short; between his woes about Sora, his fears about Kairi, and an endless slew of self-doubt whispering to him in Ansem's voice... He'd had enough.

“There is no doubt of that,” Riku replied testily, pushing a pin into the paper. Orcus was determined to cast aspersions on his decision-making at every turn, and although he thought they’d let the matter die, it seemed Riku was mistaken.

“They do cause these storms,” Sora argued in his defence, almost as exasperated. “We've crossed one before, and there are reports of sudden storms claiming ships tracking the Never Was.”

“We'll find them within the eye,” Riku confirmed.

“Assuming we're following the right storm.”

Unintentionally, Sora snapped, “We know it is one of them. If we don't take action, we'll be just as far from catching up as you always have been.”

Sora was tense, too, impatient and worried and just wanting to go ahead. Being so blatantly disrespected was taking a toll, as well – Orcus would not even look at him in acknowledgment, when he spoke.

“Your initial plan counted on knowing for certain which direction to sail!”

Riku lifted his head, eyes narrow. “And I suppose, by that logic, it counted on the pirate crew to not evade.”

Urgently, Sora pointed to the map. “The storm is moving North, as all of us have seen. If they escape now, they'll be out of the trickier waters we were counting on slowing them down, and out to open sea.”

While Kairi had remained mostly quiet, that information prompted her to speak. Striding forward with arms folded, she looked to Riku and Orcus in turn. “Tell me, Captain, Commander, what do you think our chances of catching their ship become if they do reach open water?”

Succinct, Riku didn't break his stare-down with Orcus. “Slim.”

“But they become nonexistent if the Highwind is torn apart chasing a storm to no end,” Orcus seethed.

Sora interjected, almost dismissive. “This ship is built more sturdy than any in the Royal fleet, or so I'm told, and once we're within the eye we have them!”
“The ship will fall and the storm will end.” Riku had an easier time sounding sure of himself when being directly challenged.

“Unless they aren't there.”

Abruptly, Kairi raised her voice, the edge to it enough to silence thunder. “A decision must be made, gentlemen.”

Sora stared at her, and Orcus's jaw clicked shut.

Inwardly, Riku thanked her. “We hold course. We follow them and we face them.”

With a grin, and without necessity, Sora declared, “I stand with the Captain.”

“I would sooner put my faith in someone who is sure of their course,” Kairi eyed Orcus, who'd taken on a dark expression.

“Well, so long as we're sure,” he growled.

“It's a little late to waver, and later still to question a decision that's already been made,” Riku shot at him. Kairi had relaxed a little, unable to take much more of the in-fighting on top of the uncertainty.

“Orders, Captain?” Sora couldn't help looking a little smug.

“Take orders to the helm to continue North and increase speed. We'll need to batten down hatches, start preparing for the storm -”

“Captain!” The door burst open, a wild-eyed crewman barging through. Sora leapt back, having been halfway to leaving.

“What is it?” Riku was upright in a flash.

“Smoke – it's the Kingdom, sir -”

“Smoke?” Kairi stepped in front of them all, feeling awash with cold. “What is it? A signal?”

The crewman looked all the more pale for having to address the princess with such news. “We don't think so, Your Highness.”

Riku didn't wait for more, but bolted out onto the deck.

“No...” Kairi rushed after him, Sora right on their heels. Riku had staggered to a stop, staring in the direction of an orange-red glow and smoke climbing thousands of feet high.

The direction they'd left. Radiant Garden was burning.

Frozen in horror, Kairi clasped her hands over her mouth. Sora felt almost numb with disbelief.

“I don't understand... the storms...” he mumbled, uncomprehending.

Riku just stared.

Orcus strode out after them, and spoke evenly. “It appears they've struck where you weren't looking, Captain.”

Riku heard himself order someone to turn the ship around, saw the strength go out of Kairi's legs
from the corner of his eye. Sora caught her as she sank onto the deck, which was good, because he couldn't.

He couldn't even move.

He just watched the horizon burn.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

There are a TON of characters in this chapter, so here is a handy guide to who is where:

Shore Party: Xemnas, Saix, Roxas, Axel, Xaldin, Xigbar, Luxord, Larxene.
On Board: Demyx, Vexen, Lexaeus, Zexion, Marluxia, Namine.

No warning had come to the Kingdom of Radiant Garden. Fog, unseasonably cold and impossibly thick, had overtaken the horizon, crawled in wisps like a ghostly army toward the shore, and it was already too late.

Before the ship could be spotted, flames erupted and, carried on a deadly wind, spread with unnatural ferocity. Before soldiers could draw arms or townspeople flee their homes, a monstrous wave swept away the ships docked in the harbor. Before bells could be rung, or beacons lit in high towers, the harbor town burned, and a huge shape cut through the gloom.

Forces had been dispatched to combat the pirate vessel, but discovered in moments that they were trapped on land. The sea itself had risen against them, holes torn through their hulls and water determinedly dragging the ships down to the bottom of the shore and as far out as a tide could take them.

The Ship That Never Was dropped its anchor among the wreckage, and the chance to call for help was gone.

Axel and Xaldin headed the shore party, clearing a path of devastation for those behind to follow. Handfuls of fire were thrown carelessly into the air, and with the whirl of a lance the blaze expanded, engulfing homes, forests, and people alike. Chakram hurled through windows consumed buildings in flame from the inside out, needing mere seconds to reappear in Axel's hands.

Somewhere back along the pier, a powder cache finally caught, the explosion deafening any at enough distance to escape the blast.

To anyone watching from the refuge of the palace, high above the walls of the Keep and villages beyond, it appeared that a monster had emerged from the fog. A behemoth of swirling flame and lightning strikes, eating its way up from the harbor and gradually, inevitably towards the Kingdom's heart. In its wake, only the blackened skeleton of a civilization remained, the legacy of its people only screams.

The demon pirate crew had stepped out of legend, unmasking their true power at last.

But almost none would live to tell of it.

Those still on board the Ship That Never Was simply watched, pitiless. Marluxia seethed over being left to tend his charge.

Though there was no hope of Namine escaping under his watchful eye, she was something of a convenient excuse for Xemnas to leave him behind. For that lack of trust, he wouldn't get the opportunity to slit as many throats as he would like.
There could be no other purpose in ordering him to remain on board. Besides himself, only Demyx and the trio from below deck were left to defend the ship, and even that was a superfluous garrison. Lexaeus had little function in deflecting a ranged assault, but preferred not to leave the ship if it could be avoided, and Xemnas had deemed that his brute strength would not be needed among the storm they were creating on land.

But Marluxia... Why, the name of the Kingdom alone conveyed how it abounded in plant life. Turning nature against his victims was as effortless to him as a swing of his scythe. With that much ammunition, Marluxia could have lead the charge practically single-handed. Here, his power was limited, useless for matters greater than inflicting torture on a prisoner.

Xemnas's message was anything but subtle. He would not trust Marluxia at the full force of his powers, but contained here, cut off from land and his fellow conspirators, he wasn't threat enough to even keep a watch on.

So Marluxia remained, arms crossed and narrow eyes on the chaos, and reflected that at least the little sneaking pest had been brought ashore. He would not have to suffer any escape attempts from Namine this day.

Vexen and Demyx remained the most vigilant, though the former was loathe to this collaboration. Just a touch of ice to the air kept the pale ship obscured, a chilly mist meeting the heat of destructive flames close by.

Nearly everything in view had been razed, flame cutting a path for the crew and moving them single-mindedly towards the palace. Any treasures hidden among the cinders, though, were left untouched. They had not come to raid, nor would they pretend to.

With scant minutes to prepare, another force of Radiant Garden's army was launched to head them off, halt the oncoming attack before it reached the walls of the Keep. Had any survived at the harbor, the small party might have found themselves surrounded.

As it was, a retreat would have been wiser.

Flames glinted off the soldier's swords as they drew near. Eyes widened with terror reflected back the glowing blue, green, and gold gaze of the crew.

With barely a flinch among them, the pirates marched forward. Even vastly outnumbered, it didn't take all of them to level this new assault. Larxene and Axel were destructive forces all on their own, with Xaldin and Xigbar providing more than adequate cover to destroy anyone they missed. Where electricity and fire weren't, Larxene's knives were; thrown into the throats of anyone coming, and into the backs of anyone trying to get away.

Saix, though more feral than Roxas had ever seen him with extended claws and hair raised, only raised a hand for the rare person who managed to break through their front line.

Protected in the center of the inferno, neither Roxas nor the Captain had yet to even cross blades with a single person. Perhaps Luxord, as well, whose purpose was not entirely clear yet.

The fate of the Kingdom's military was bloody, and quick.

A mere eight pirates decimated their ranks, and in desperation, they fell back to defend the palace with every man still standing. Now stepping over the slain, the pirates pursued, an unstoppable force.

As they came up on the Keep, Luxord was drinking from a very large bottle with the confident air of a man who knew no danger, and tipped a lunging guard almost casually into the moat. It could have
been a trick of the eyes, but Roxas thought the guard had slowed right before Luxord weaved around him and gave him a shove.

Heat hit his back, and Roxas jerked around to see a wall of flame springing violently from the ground, creating a wall around them and blocking anyone daring to come close. A dry wind followed and swept through the flames, spreading it rapidly over the grounds.

As hot as the air was, Roxas felt cold.

He saw, now. Twilight Town got off easy. At one time, he might have felt something about that. If he were truly a pirate, through and through, Roxas might have thought longingly on all the loot they were bypassing. He might have considered the possibility of gaining something in this endeavor, and wanted. But there was no thought of profit at all in Roxas's bowed head.

He couldn't spare a thought for anything or anyone besides Namine. He hadn't been able to do anything for her, in the end.

A moat and a raised bridge stood as the last obstacles between them and their destination. A sparse few men held their posts atop the high walls.

Xigbar glanced up, as though taking stock of them all, and smirked. He leapt from the ground, springing back and forth across apparently empty air, gaining momentum to land on the wall of the Keep. The soldiers manning the bridge could only gape as he fired a single shot into each other their heads, blood splattering over gleaming stone.

Larxene's cackle followed each crack of gunpowder, and with Saix and Roxas both at heel, Xemnas stood before the bridge and waited for it to fall.

Xigbar dropped out of sight over the Keep wall, screams ringing out and promptly silencing before the bridge began to lower. It landed heavily, and Xemnas strode forward as though the palace grounds were his own.

“Axel. Xaldin. Destroy all you can from here.”

“Yes, Captain,” Xaldin began manipulating the flames into deadly swirling vortexes, engulfing the oncoming defense in the tornado.

Axel said nothing, eyes on Saix and Roxas.

“Larxene.”

Gleefully, Larxene had leapt forward when the bridge was less than a foot off the ground, hands crackling. With a cry of “Lightning!”, she hurled bolts of static into the moat and left it sparking. Xigbar, on the other side, started to charge up the wall as easily as if it were even ground, reloading his guns with a loud, wild laugh.

While Luxord slowed time around Radiant Garden's defenders to disorient them, Xigbar picked off those on the battlements, and the way was practically clear.

Reinforcements would come from behind in time, marching out of farther reaches of the Kingdom, but a barrier of flame and a lethally charged moat would prove impassable to any human army.

Roxas's hands clenched at his sides as he followed, the usually pale glow off his skin turning a bright bluish-white for all the pressure it took to keep it contained. His eyes darted around for any survivors,
but the grounds were afire and abandoned – maybe the guards had all come out to the Keep, or maybe some were still within, protecting the Royal Family.

It meant there would be no one for him to turn his magic against... In most ways, that was a good thing. Still, Roxas hated all the more that he couldn't tell what his purpose here was, protected at the Captain's side.

All but Saix, Xemnas and himself stationed themselves in the bailey, either maintaining their defenses, or sniffing out any soldiers who had gone into hiding.

The three of them entered the palace vestibule, smashing the doors right through before Roxas could even look up to determine what had destroyed them.

A final blockade of guards, pitifully small and almost quaking with fear, awaited them just inside.

“Clear my path,” Xemnas ordered Saix coolly. “No survivors but the Admiral.”

A hollow smirk spread over Saix's face as he lunged into the nearest soldier, tearing the man's throat out in one quick clench of his hand. There were almost a dozen of them, to start, but it was clear none of them would last.

“You should be armed, from this point on.”

Roxas glanced up quickly at the command, and grudgingly acknowledged, “Yes, sir.”

The keyblade materialized in his hand. Still, there was no need to use it. The vestibule was a blood-strewn mess by the time Saix was done, gore caked under his sharp nails.

Xemnas carelessly stepped over a soldier's corpse, spattering his boots with cooling blood, and withdrew a folded square of parchment from within his coat. It unfolded into a very basic map of the castle, charting the route they would take to the Admiral, though the coal had smudged in parts.

Displeasing, but still usable. Xemnas led the way from behind, as Saix was still tasked with charging ahead to tear apart anyone still in the increasingly empty halls.

Undoubtedly, there would be some secret passage out of the palace for those of great enough importance to escape in times of siege. Royals and nobles would have surely fled there by now, but servants left behind could be made to give up its location, should Xemnas need it.

But the absence of the Admiral was... curious.

As though the screams weren't worth paying attention to, he idly glanced at tapestries and paintings lining the walls. “The Royal Family...” he mused. “I wonder if they realize how important their blood may have been. A pity...”

At this subtle urging, Roxas raised his eyes. His attention was immediately caught by a portrait of a redhead girl, smiling in a somber, dignified sort of way, her face startlingly alike to Namine's even in paint.

The princess of Radiant Garden. Instantly, he understood who she was, though he couldn't bring a name to mind – she was to Namine what Sora was to him...

Irrationally, he was tempted to steal the painting. It was double his size, impossible to take off the wall, much less carry, but he wanted to bring it back to her. Just... as a token, or a comfort. Something for Namine to have...
But it wasn't really her. It wouldn't make Namine feel anything more real. So, maybe that was the sort of gift that would hurt, rather than help. And that sort of thing could not be hidden from Marluxia, anyway. Somehow, Roxas doubted he would simply destroy the painting – more likely he'd find a way to defile it and make the hurt cut deeper.

Maybe Roxas was only projecting... He wished he could see Sora. Even the sight of him in Namine's drawings helped, a little.

They'd caught up to Saix, who was spitting bits of a maid's flesh onto the floor, clothes stained all down his front. Xemnas didn't bat an eye.

“No sign of the Admiral?”

“None, sir,” he snarled. “The Royal Family appears to have retreated, as well. Shall I find someone still living to question?”

“Yes... On our way to his quarters.”

Saix paused briefly to sniff out another living human, and took off down a passageway. Roxas hadn't found a way to tear his eyes off the dead maid, her blank eyes staring at the ceiling and her head nearly separate from her neck.

Roxas's body kept ahead of his mind, knowing to keep following Xemnas. They were walking on, footsteps echoing until Xemnas stopped outside a door and demolished it with only a flick of his wrist and a flash of red.

Roxas took hasty steps backwards, shoulders up and eyes wide in alarm. Xemnas, ignoring him completely, consulted the smudge on the map and looked into the room before deigning it irrelevant. There was nothing in his hands, anymore, but Roxas thought there was something left behind in that vacant space.

The door Xemnas had wrecked was in less than pieces... Roxas couldn't even tell where it was, or had been. Whatever that power was, he hadn't seen it before... Roxas had never even thought to wonder what Xemnas's power was.

The Captain had moved on the next door, destroyed that one as well. Roxas kept well back, with half of his attention unwillingly piqued for Saix's return.

It didn't take nearly as long as he thought it should. Saix skulked back to Xemnas with glowing eyes and a growl.

“Captain.”

“Report,” Xemnas stared into the empty room he'd found, eyes narrowed in vague impatience. Regardless, Saix showed no fear in relaying the information he gathered.

“The Admiral isn't in the Kingdom. He left on an urgent voyage days before our arrival.”

Something in Roxas's throat dropped into his stomach, and he prepared to dodge an outraged frenzy. Xemnas's eyes looked like flame, his mouth twisting in displeasure.

“... How strange that we were not informed.” Xemnas spoke as though he was ordering someone's death.

“He could not have gone far,” Saix bowed his head, attempting to salvage the situation. “His vessel
will have seen the smoke already, and could return to launch an assault.”

Roxas swallowed hard. He couldn't say he cared one way or the other for the Admiral, but he knew that meeting their ship would be a death sentence for all on board.

“Then we look for leverage and kill the Royal Family,” Xemnas's ire simmered just below the surface. “His quarters. Lead me to them.”

“Right away,” Saix straightened up and turned to lead.

“Follow,” Xemnas threw a sharp look at Roxas. He trailed behind them with an even deeper sense of dread.

It was just the three of them in the palace, and if they were going to hunt the Royals down, it would be down to all three to carry out the gruesome order. Roxas imagined being forced to murder Namine's sister, or whatever the princess really was to her...

Even if he wasn't the one to do it, even if he had to watch instead, he didn't know how he'd live with himself.

They were leaving the Royal Wing to go down another, nearly as grand. Xemnas voiced his thoughts darkly, “Perhaps this time we'll take Her Highness on board... As a motivator. Would you care for the task of convincing our informant to be more careful in her divining?”

Saix smirked, “It would be my pleasure.”

Roxas didn't want to understand. He didn't want to imagine what 'convincing' Namine meant, if it involved the princess and Saix's brand of viciousness.

“You have earned a reward, after all, even if this journey was fruitless...” Xemnas's voice was eerily even.

“Thank you, Captain,” Saix came up to a pair of locked doors and stopped. “In here.”

Expecting Xemnas to obliterate the doors with ease again, it came as a surprise when he turned instead to Roxas and ordered, “Open it.”

Complete uncertainty gripped him. Did Xemnas expect him to try opening the doors with his blade? There was no way of knowing that he could. More likely he was calling for Roxas's skill with a lockpick... That made more sense, surely.

He sank to one knee and fished out a pick. No sooner had he done that then Xemnas was hauling him back up by the hair.

“You have a key, boy,” he reminded him coldly.

Roxas hissed, eyes prickling in pain. “I-I'll try-...”

Xemnas released him, folding his arms.

Exhaling, Roxas lifted the keyblade, very aware of them both watching and what they were capable of doing to him if he failed. He held the blade at arm's length to rest it awkwardly on the lock, silently willing something to happen.

Seconds ticked by, and Xemnas began to consider how worthwhile this test was – for time's sake, he could demolish his way in, but he rather disliked the risk of damaging anything that might be of use
inside.

And he still needed to know if that key worked on more than one door.

Nothing was happening. Roxas was beginning to wonder if he should say something, however nervously, when some invisible force, warm and strong took hold of his arm. On impulse, he tried to jerk back or even turn the key, but found he couldn't move even when he tried. All around the blade and his arm, the glow lit up brighter.

A moment later, the lock clicked and the doors swung open by a few inches.

The instant its job had been done, the pressure around his arm disappeared, making the keyblade feel all the heavier for it. Caught off-guard, Roxas's tingling arm buckled and the blade dropped down by his side.

Roxas stared at it.

“Very good.” A matter of interest did not make for a success, but all the same, Xemnas was very marginally appeased.

No lamps lit the expansive room, and the fireplace sat empty, but a large window facing onto the sea let in the weak dawn and flickering light of fires still burning, casting odd hues over the powder blue, gold-accented walls. Unlike the suites of the Royal Wing, no paintings had been mounted on their bare expanses. Most of the room's grandeur was in the enormous bed, ornately carved and newly made, a sofa built to match at its foot. There was hardly any more furniture to speak of, only a couple of chairs, a dresser table, and writing desk.

A half-emptied bottle of wine on the dresser seemed the only sign that anyone lived here at all.

Xemnas entered, surveying the room with the vaguest sense of interest. What they needed was something to hold over the Admiral, but all the same, Xemnas had a compulsion to learn his tastes.

“What do we look for?” Saix ignored Roxas, walking in ahead of him.

“Corruption in the ranks, emotional ties, blackmail. Anything that may persuade him to come quietly. I would prefer his body intact.”

With a grunt of understanding, Saix began to efficiently turn the place over, deeming the Admiral's desk of the most value to inspect first. Roxas lingered the doorway, afraid to intervene or disrupt in any way.

His keyblade still felt heavy. Like the weapon itself was exhausted. Had he opened the lock, or did it do that all on its own?

Could he make it unlock other things...? Marluxia's door? Namine's shackles?

Idly, Xemnas was reading the label of the wine bottle, while Saix scrutinized documents and tossed them aside once they were deemed irrelevant.

Then he paused with one letter in hand, slowing to read it properly. “Captain.”

“What have you found?”

Saix's eyes didn't lift from the page, still drinking in its meaning.

“He has a son, sir.”
Everything in Xemnas's demeanor changed and he turned sharply, intrigued. “What?”

“This may be what we need,” Saix came to him, handing over the letter. Xemnas scanned the contents, and almost immediately located the relevant passage.

‘... Furthermore, congratulations on the promotion of your son are sincerely in order. I regret that I cannot attend the ceremony, but as I understand it, Riku will be taking the position of Captain of your finest vessel, the Highwind. I can only imagine the pride you must feel, as Admiral, but hope that it will come second to the validation of your decision when he brings Her Highness Lady Namine back to Radiant Garden ...’

Unexpectedly, Xemnas laughed.

Roxas's gut twisted, instinct telling him that everything about that sound was as dangerous as a knife to the throat. It was victorious but void, wrenching and wrong.

“Captain of the Highwind,” he murmured triumphantly. “Never mind the Admiral... We hunt the ship.”

“Shall I go ahead to rally the crew?” Saix's eyes gleamed.

“We depart at once.”

“Yes, sir.”

The bad feeling hitting Roxas was nothing like the discomfort of hearing their idle talk of murder, before. He felt suddenly winded, knowing against all logic that something much worse had just been put in motion. Something horrific enough to turn the Captain's thoughts away from the Royals just when he had them at his mercy.

Roxas didn't know or care for the Admiral's son anymore than he did the Admiral, himself, but knowing Xemnas now wanted him was enough to make him fear for this stranger's fate.

All Xemnas's interest in Ansem lost, he went to leave the man's quarters, and Saix was taking long strides ahead to reach the crew as fast as possible. Neither even deigned to look back at him, make sure he still followed.

A trickle of guilty hope ran down Roxas's spine as he wondered, briefly, if their preoccupation with this news could cover his escape.

His hesitation was noticed.

“Shall I have Saix drag you?”

“No,” Roxas denied quickly, springing into action and staying close to Xemnas, lest he give him a reason to lose his good mood.

He still didn't understand why the sudden change...

When they left the castle, the bailey was in cinders, and anyone still left alive had fled. The raiding party left at the Keep watched them approach, and responded with varying degrees of confusion upon seeing their Captain return empty-handed.

They were informed that their target had changed, that the Admiral was no longer important. The Captain of the Highwind would be their prize, now.
They would return to the ship, and sail as far out onto open water as possible. Finding the ship wouldn't be difficult.

It would come to them.

“Captain!”

A bellow from the crow's nest, needless in its warning. They could all see the encroaching fog, becoming thick over the water as the Highwind steered at full-tilt towards it.

“Hold course,” Riku commanded the helmsman, right at his side, and flagged one his crewman. “We sail into it. Find Sora, have him take Her Highness below and into hiding.”

“Yes, Captain!”

“We'll be going blind, sir,” the helmsman sounded alarmed, but made no move to disobey. “If either the wind or the current takes us even slightly to one side, we could miss the Kingdom entirely, no telling where that fog even ends -”

“We're not aiming for the Kingdom.”

“... Sir?”

Riku's eyes had narrowed, heart thudding powerfully against his chest and aching as though in betrayal.

“We're not just approaching the fog, it's coming to us. That's where we'll find them.”

The Ship That Never Was had already left Radiant Garden, and there was nothing he could do for his home with only a ship. They weren't equipped to put out the fires, repair the chaos.

They were equipped with cannons and steel.

“We stay within the fog. Prepare for combat.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

This may have been the hardest thing we've ever had to write, so we hope you all like it.

From within the thick of it, the fog created a sense of claustrophobic unease. No man could see more than a foot in front of him, so they held formation out of little other choice. Every soldier aboard the Highwind had swords drawn and tension through their backs, the cannons at the ready and the princess hidden down in the ship's hold with Sora as her guard.

They had strict orders not to sink the ship. Riku couldn't risk Namine... Or Roxas, for that matter. They would have to take them on hand-to-hand. A mere twelve pirates, against the Royal Navy's finest.

And they were nonetheless at a disadvantage. Riku feared they wouldn't even find the Ship That Never Was. They just kept circling, staying within the cold, thick mist. Riku felt certain that once it began to clear around them, the ship would be lost.

Closer than he might have thought, though, Xemnas and his crew watched for a dark shape, undoubtedly aimless.

The only one forbidden from being on deck was, once again, Marluxia. Xemnas had commanded him to guard Namine, cutting and direct, and citing Radiant Garden's mission as the cause. Any who managed to slip by (unlikely as it was) would be looking for her, and Marluxia would be the end of the line. Even those who had remained with the ship were still up on deck, Zexion hidden in shadows and skimming the pages of a large tome, while Lexaeus stood sentry before him.

It was driving some of them mad, this silent, taunting search. After the chaos they'd left behind, Xigbar was still riled up and couldn't seem to stop longingly twirling his pistols. Luxord had almost draped himself against the railing, grumbling about how much faster things would progress if they dispensed with pretense and simply took the ship down. Being a manipulator of time seemed to have him all the more impatient, and it was likely he was fiddling with the seconds to speed things along, unnoticed by anyone else.

Between Axel and Vexen, Demyx's ability to perpetuate the fog was almost thoughtlessly simple, and he was all the worse off for it. He twitched infrequently as though tempted to bolt, never one for a serious fight, yet he'd had the most success in spotting the Highwind.

At least, he imagined so. Imagination was the very thing undoing him and setting him on edge.

“... Captain...”

“They can't be far, now,” Xemnas murmured, hand claw-like against Roxas's shoulder.

Periodically, Roxas was called upon to light up the water, but even his manufactured brightness had trouble cutting through the fog. In his distraction, it faded too fast, and might have been more likely to act as a beacon than get them anywhere closer to their target.

He wasn't thinking very much about it, though, nor was he paying much heed even to Xemnas's
hand. Roxas was preoccupied with thoughts of the impending destruction, of the Admiral's son, of the possibility of jumping ship with Namine.

And there was... something else. Something nagging at him, like something either out there or in his head was trying to get his attention, but the purpose and direction was elusive still.

Roxas twitched when Xemnas drifted away without warning, the Captain leaving the bough to instead take the helm. He didn't move, himself, expecting that he might be needed again where he was... but without the Captain, he was free to look around, and he tried to make out which distorted shadow was Axel's.

Axel wasn't looking for him, in return. He seemed as focused on his task as Vexen, lifting the surface of the sea with heat until it met the cold and crystallized. In truth, his mind was over at the helm, with the man taking them into battle.

So much was still uncertain, and it was difficult to review what he knew as fact when there were so many liars aboard.

Saix reported that Xemnas would make them whole, but that was a lie. Namine told him that being whole meant being mortal, and that was truth. Xemnas told them this attack on Radiant Garden and the Admiral's son was the first step towards the restoration of the crew, but that could only be false. Marluxia imparted that Xemnas wasn't getting all of Namine's information, and that was true.

The Admiral's bloodline was important to Xemnas's personal goal, and that was to live forever. To rule. This was about power.

Axel just hadn't figured out what was in between, aside from Roxas.

Infuriatingly, the only way to learn what more there was to this was to help Xemnas with his goal... and while the thought of sabotage was a tempting one – who could really stop him from killing the Captain of the Highwind, throwing things off-balance? - Axel didn't know what good that would do, yet. If it would really put an end to things or bring him to a satisfactory conclusion.

On the other vessel, Riku was starting to wonder if this search was fruitless, and thought he might do anything to finish this.

But he couldn't signal the Never Was. Surely they were evading... and if they opened fire to provoke an attack, their position would be weak.

There was only one thing he was able to do, and Riku almost felt foolish for taking so long to do it. He sheathed his sword and reached into his coat, taking in the pale gray vastness before making everything dark. Riku tied the blindfold firmly, closed his eyes, and listened.

Creaking, swaying, swishing... The ripple of sails and sea. All sounds he knew.

There had to be an anomaly, something that didn't belong...

A hiss. Soft and farther away than Riku should have been able to pick out, but he had always been more attuned in darkness. It was the creation of steam.
“... Hard to port,” he muttered to the nervous helmsman. “Slow it down, as much as possible.”

The Highwind lurched a little with the drastic movement. At a distance from them, Xemnas began to smirk.

“They come,” he murmured, returning to Roxas. “... Light.”

Holding his breath, Roxas shut his eyes to shield them. There was no darkness behind his eyelids, regardless. Bright light expanded around him like a flare, and was spotted by the helm. The Highwind angled immediately.

“They're... They're right there, Captain,” the helmsman gripped the wheel tight, trying to keep his voice steady.

Riku's heart beat up in his throat, but he was better at pretending it wasn't. “Prepare to dock.”

“Prepare to dock,” Xemnas turned away and strode back up towards the helm, hearing movement from all around as the pirates readied themselves for a fight.

Down in the hull of the Highwind, Sora felt the ship rock sharply and knew. The two of them had been able to feel it, the entire time they'd been hiding. Kairi had found a cranny to tuck herself into, nervously wringing her hands whenever she wasn't gripping the hilt of her sword to make sure it was still there.

Neither one of them could stop thinking but they didn't breathe a word. Kairi felt almost choked by terror, never sure which creak meant they were being approached, and Sora... Sora couldn't stop worrying for Riku, fearing that he'd miss Roxas.

And a less noble part of him ached for revenge.

But he was needed the most where he was, between Kairi and everyone else. That didn't make it easier on either one of them, for they both knew... They could feel Namine and Roxas closer than ever.

Sora knew when they'd come upon the pirates because he could feel Roxas as distinctly as though he was right beside him.

Roxas let his light fade away, no longer needing it and redirecting his focus to his weapon.

At once, the ranks of the Never Was appeared to triple, Zexion's eyes almost burning with the brightness of their glow, keeping to the shadows as much as he was able. He produced puppet copies, made of nothing but air, but all of them bristling and looking like a very real threat.

Two flashes of fire formed in Axel's hands, and he hurled them right ahead.
The fog lit up, and one of the officers barely had time to yell, “Get down!” before the main sail was hit. Armed men dropped to the deck while others hastened to lower the plank across to the Never Was, marching across with swords in hand and furious yells. The moisture in the air snuffed the flames, but not nearly fast enough.

Xigbar simply leapt the short distance between the two ships, right above the reach of the soldiers’ swords before they even thought to swing. Bullets rained down on anyone who didn't look to hold rank. Axel was quick to follow, at much higher risk, but he needed to get below to smoke out anyone not on deck.

They all had orders. Cripple the vessel, and weed out the Captain.

Thunder boomed overhead, deafening, and the air itself seemed to crackle. Lightning struck at the Highwind’s crow's nest, and hit the sole person manning it. Xaldin's lances tore through sails and rigging, a strong wind pelting the Highwind strongly enough to bend the mast and nearly capsize the ship. There was an immediate call to weigh anchor but just the harsh shift had lost them men overboard, while others were knocked right off their feet, and the connection between ships momentarily broke.

The wind at least whipped away some of the fog. The Navy resumed boarding with more determination now that they could see, but they were just as easily seen.

Demyx retreated a little, pulling water up to shield himself, but the front lines stood ready. Roxas had his blade prepared; he would defend himself from the Navy... but nothing more.

The officers were mostly in a mess of confusion, though – swords met illusions out of the fog, passing through the phantom pirates and dispersing them into thin air. Zexion's hand was almost a blur as he furiously worked over the book, needing to keep aware of each one and reform them as quickly as they were cut down.

Men not thrown off-kilter by fake pirates were condemned to much worse. While it was easy for the Navy to use numbers to their advantage, the most they seemed capable of doing was inflicting superficial wounds, and dying in a heap.

Not all their successes seemed shallow, at a glance. Several soldiers attempted to stand between Axel and his objective, and fighting them in all-too-dismissive a manner, Axel weaved away from one sword and into another.

The blade ran clean, right through his shoulder, and he hissed.

The wielder had scarcely a second before his comrade was sent sprawling back several feet, forcibly impaled by the throw of a chakram. Hand now free of his weapon, Axel hauled the soldier in close, temperature on the rise.

He watched in horror as the steel glowed red-hot.

A scream mingled with the roar of flames.

Steel shrieked, voices rang out and died away, and the fury of the elements whipped around both ships.
Nonchalant, Xemnas watched from the quarter deck, visibility still poor. Demyx, from within his protective water barrier, was still producing fog at the quickest rate he could. Saix bristled and breathed raggedly at Xemnas's side, his bloodlust transforming him, but he didn't move without instruction.

Dying screams and clashing steel was a siren's song, and it seemed unkind to have Saix restrain himself any longer. Xemnas did not fear a mere army. He had no real need for his protective vigil.

“...Destroy his crew. If you find him... Bring him to me.”

Saix's lips curled up over his fangs. “Yes, Captain.”

Without summoning his weapon, Saix stepped forward, swallowed by the fog in an instant.

Wind continued to buffet the mist and tear at eyes, but Roxas still barely had time to block as a sword thrust out of the gloom and nearly ran him through. He swung his keyblade up to block and a burst of light sent the soldier staggering back. Nearby, Larxene shoved a knife through the blinded soldier's throat, and whirled him around to use him as a grisly shield. She kept her grasp on the knife, like a handle for a puppet.

Blood bubbled past his lips with a gurgle, hands clawed at the blade, and it was probably a mercy when one of his comrades slashed open his chest in their attempt to hit Larxene.

In turn, they almost fell immediately to Xaldin's lance, being twirled around his body in a deadly, taunting dance.

Saix ignored it all, stalking through the fog as swords nicked and cut his flesh. No one got any farther than the draw of blood before he charged into them, rending their sword arms from the sockets and slicking the already-wet deck with blood. He reached the plank to board the Highwind, simply grabbing all those trying to cross by the throat and discarding them into the rumbling water.

They were being boarded by more than a mere two, now, which left Riku no choice. He'd abandon his position at the helm, and lead from the front.

Using the railing as leverage, he leapt over and onto the deck below, sword ringing as it was yanked from its sheath.

Axel had long since wrenched himself free of the blade, metal molten and knocked carelessly into his adversary. The stench had been terrible and the scream nearly as much so, melting steel burning through clothing and fusing to skin. With no other challenger to stop him, he'd descended, scorching the rails on his way further and further in.

Sora, already breathless with anxiety, raised his sword at the sound of footsteps.

“She's here...” Kairi whispered, winded, but unable to help herself. As much as she was afraid, she was being overcome; she could sense Namine closer than ever, practically feel their hands entwining. Namine was reaching out to her. “She's right here...”

“I know,” Sora tried to hush her, panicked. “Roxas is there, too.”
Breaths grew short as the air became heavy. Smoke was starting to seep through the air like dye, but Sora hadn't identified the source. He'd assumed the smell to be gunpowder coming off the cannons above them, but once he started to cough, he realized the darkness itself was hazier. It was choking them both, Kairi's coughs higher and distinctly feminine.

Her eyes watered, and she uselessly tried to stifle her hacking with a sleeve.

Keen green eyes flickered towards the noise, glowing like sunlight, and Axel made his way through the hull.

On deck, Riku pulled the blindfold away and cast it into the wind, shouting, “Orcus! Take the lead on the defense, don't let any more of them on the ship!”

He had to get to the Never Was, recover the prisoners, and then send it to the bottom of the sea. If they could just break through their lines, a single man might not be noticed... Not with so many attacking. Not with so many dying.

Maybe he didn't even need to get them on board the Highwind, to rescue them. If he could heave the lifeboat over the edge...

“Captain!” The affirmative was called, but cut off short.

Teeth gritting together, Orcus had met with what was surely a leviathan. Lexaeus had left Zexion's side – Vexen charged with his defense while the master of illusions worked – and the destruction he was wreaking was something out of terrifying myth. Fully encased in stone, it took only a sweep of his broad tomahawk to cleave their soldiers in two, and Orcus's sword could do nothing but glance off of it.

Xemnas peered through the fog with narrow eyes, hearing the Navy call for their Captain and ringing inside with greed. Saix had heard, too, and turned sharply.

Vision clouded by fog and addled by chaos, it was impossible to discern the man who spoke first, but he'd heard Orcus. Saix would deal with him first.

Riku swerved out of the way of an oncoming knife whizzing towards him, finding loose and snapped rope rigging. He considered climbing anyway, using them to swing aboard, but there was too much risk with the wind and electricity – light on his feet, he weaved through the fighting to grasp the starboard rail.

In truth, this was no less risky. Everything was slick, and the leap was too impressive for an ordinary man.

But Riku was not ordinary. He'd done things like this before.

He flipped over the side, launching himself to the Never Was not a moment too soon. Demyx had built up the water, fingers dancing over strings to push and pull the tide, and the Highwind rocked so badly that even the pirates lost their footing.

Riku rolled, landed as light as possible, and called to the closest of his soldiers still alive. They looked helpless, pathetic, staving off only illusions and looking for all the world like they would
retreat if only they had somewhere to go.

“Get their lifeboat over the side!” he roared. “Hurry!”

Without a word in response, they hastened away, perhaps even thinking they'd try to row off in it like cowards, but Riku didn't have the time to call them back or fear what desperate men might do.

He had to get below deck, and do it without being killed.

Sora's options were running out. They would die, cowering down here.

The smoke was thickening like the impossible fog above them, so little *air* left that they'd surely stop breathing altogether before long. His shirt was a weak barrier, and tears streamed from his stinging eyes.

“Hide all you want,” Axel called out, drawling every word. “If you hole up, you'll be trapped with the smoke... If you're lucky, you'll choke on it before you choke on water.”

There was nothing more for him to do. He wouldn't pursue whoever was down here, in hiding; all Axel *had* to do was flush them out, and if that wasn't exactly what was about to happen, they were fools.

He fell back into the dark, singeing holes into the floor, going to rejoin the fray.

Sora tried to think fast – where could they go, how could he keep her *safe* – when he was thrown to the floor, ship tilting violently under Demyx's assault. His head spun, ribs bruised.

“Sora -” Kairi croaked desperately, reaching out to him.

The smoke was inescapable. Sora could fend off an enemy's sword but he couldn't protect Kairi from the air itself.

They had to run. Every instinct screamed it, and Sora was in no position to combat that. He lurched up, hand thrust out towards her, and she grasped it instantly.

“Come on!” He pulled her from the crevice in the wall, leaning in close and guiding her other hand to hold her shirt up against her nose and mouth. As firmly and fast as he could, he wheezed, “Don't you dare let go until I say. If I tell you to run, *run*."

She nodded, head swimming and shaking from choked breath. Kairi hardly felt her legs move as they dashed across weakened wood to find stairs.

So much around them was burning, embers eating away at everything like termites. Not a single spark had ignited into full-blown flame; they were all still under Axel's control, and the smolder produced a blacker smoke than fire.

It was too thick to navigate. Too dark and dangerous to see.

If Sora could only get them up on deck, where they stood a *chance*...
Saix had cleared the path to Lexaeus and Orcus, the two of them locked in a laughable impression of combat; Orcus seemed little more than an irritating gnat, circling him incessantly and trying to find a weak spot in the stone. Lexaeus had only yet to kill him because he could see by his sash that he held rank, but couldn't get him still long enough to see what it was.

“Stand down,” Saix barked to him, and Lexaeus unhesitatingly did so. He moved on to another man, grabbing him smoothly by the throat and breaking his back over one knee.

Orcus turned his sword on Saix.

With the briefest scan and claymore in his clawed hand, Saix growled, “Who do you name as Captain?”

There wasn't nearly enough loyalty in Orcus to lie, but his contempt outweighed even his dislike for Riku. “I don't care to converse with a pirate.”

He slashed at Saix, blade-work aggressive and aiming often for the eyes, but Saix weaved out of his way with ease.

“Honor or no,” he regarded Orcus coldly, “your fate will be the same.”

The claymore came down with enough force to shatter the blade. With an alarmed snarl, Orcus lunged at him the broken blade still in hand, attempting to drive it into his gut.

Saix was quicker. Effortlessly, he caught Orcus's wrist and snapped the bones.

His yell was strangled, dropping the sword and onto his knees. A slight sneer passed over Saix's face as he looked into Orcus's, and saw defeat there.

“Disappointing.”

His weapon was brought down with careless force, and Orcus's blood splattered across the deck.

With the mayhem spread across both the Highwind and the Never Was, Riku had managed to keep his presence subtle, but that was as far as his luck went. He closed his eyes, trying to get even the vaguest mental map of the ship, to no avail.

The fog was clogging again, and all the wind was gone. Even the brief flashes of light couldn't cut through; they were as useless a beacon as a firefly in lieu of a lighthouse. Besides, Riku didn't want to follow the light, he wanted to find Namine and Roxas.

Creeping along low to the ground, Riku could at least ignore the illusory pirates – they didn't move right, didn't sound right, didn't even smell right. They were insubstantial, and he could avoid drawing attention to himself if he kept on-task...

But his way was blocked, and Riku was almost certain it was the way. He could access the hull, but
not with the very real figure ahead of him, disturbingly close. No; two of them, one petite, the other broader.

If he cut them down quick...

Unpleasantly startling, the broadness turned out to be a shield, and Riku's sword clashed against it with a jarring crack. No less surprised, Vexen lifted a haughty chin and formed his shield properly from the ice he'd been holding.

“Another little soldier found his way to where he doesn't belong...” Vexen jeered. Riku pivoted around the shield and flicked the tip of his sword up, slicing a thin line up the side of his face.

His yelp of shock almost broke Zexion's focus.

“Agh-! But a tricky one!” Vexen hissed scathingly, and ice spread under his feet.

Axel had escaped the Highwind's hull, with Sora and Kairi not far behind. Following the funnel of smoke, the two of them charged upwards to clearer air. Sora's hand still clamped tight around Kairi's with the other holding his drawn sword.

They were surrounded by enemies, now. His heart beat in double-time, and Kairi's was almost breaking her chest.

For all the Princess's fear, something had managed to worm its way through it, so powerful she was nearly possessed. It gave her strength in the last sprint, but hadn't ended there, even with fighting all around them and the smoke indiscernible from fog.

Sora had yet to notice. He looked about wildly, trying to find Riku amidst it all and feeling a lurch when he was nowhere -

But it would be no good to seek him out, not with Kairi still in danger. She was still his priority. Riku would never forgive him if something bad happened - he'd never forgive himself.

Wide-eyed, Kairi pulled against Sora's grip and took off at a run, dragging him with her.

“What are you doing?!” Stunned, he almost staggered, but sprinted to keep up with her. He couldn't let go.

Kairi's mind was clouding, her instinct to survive overtaken by the one beckoning.

Namine, she was beckoning. From the Never Was, she was screaming out to her, mentally if not aloud – and the fighting didn't matter, anymore. Nothing but finding her mattered.

They needed to be together.

Kairi weaved around soldiers and pirates, corpses and gore, with utter single-mindedness. She didn't truly know the way, but it didn't matter. She was being guided.

Coming up on the side of the ship, she didn't hesitate to climb up onto the plank. Distantly, hardly audible over the clamor all around, she breathed, “She's here...”
“Kairi, no!”

Without thinking, Sora lost his balance and came terrifyingly close to falling in his attempt to keep her in his grasp. His fingers slipped out of hers in the effort to steady himself, but Kairi didn't seem to notice. Her hand went to her sword, and she vanished into the fog.

A stomach-lurching crack, worse than even that of the lightning, diverted the attention of all aboard the Highwind and even some from the Never Was. Axel had been throwing his chakram into the mast, his weapons bursting into flame each time he reformed them in his hands, and finally it had split like a tree.

The mast fell, the *slam* tremendous and splintering the rails it crushed underneath. The Highwind would be completely beyond recovery.

Sora glanced back only in time to spot Orcus, dead at Saix’s feet, before the falling mast obscured most everything. He had no choice but to dash across, now – he dropped onto the deck to chase after Kairi, sword raised.

He would fight only to reach Kairi – and Riku, he had to find Riku, he had to be on board...

Riku was still engaged against Vexen. The sound of the mast being destroyed had only distracted him for a moment, unwilling to lose either ground or footing.

The ice had made their small battlefield more dangerous still, Vexen forced to keep it contained to prevent his own people from being caught within it. Riku could scarcely find a proper stance, but every opportunity was seized and he nearly had Vexen bested. Zexion himself was posing little threat; his shadows weren't much good against someone acclimatized to the dark.

Riku's sword met the shield so fiercely that some of the icy sheen over the metal chipped away, and Vexen nearly threw himself into it just to keep Riku at bay.

“I could use some assistance...”

Zexion conjured another phantom soldier, trying to distract him long enough for Vexen to find the upper hand. It nearly worked; the point of a sword was in Riku's peripheral vision, and he instinctively went to dodge, blade clanging off the shield again.

“What ...” Another illusion. Riku let it pass through him,ducking and slashing for Vexen's legs.

“Impertinent boy...”

Amidst all the new light – Axel was razing the fallen mast, heat cutting through everything – Sora was starting to make out shapes. At the very least, he thought he knew the smaller figure he was coming up upon.

He ran, a small part of him beginning to hope despite himself. If that was Kairi, maybe they really could make it down to the brig. Together, they could find-

The figure raised it's sword, and Sora brought up his own to block the overhead strike. Not Kairi.

Swords clashed, and light flared between them.

Roxas froze, and stared into Sora's narrow eyes, which went round with shock.

Sora stared back, into glowing blue.
The remaining soldiers of the Highwind were swarming the Never Was, abandoning a ship no longer safe, and Saix was still looming over Orcus's body.

He had been trying to scent the Captain, but it was all to no avail. If he was still on board, he wouldn't be for long.

“He isn't here,” Saix intoned, and raised his voice. “Back to the ship.”

Lexaeus led the charge back, making straight for his comrades locked in combat against Riku. Vexen's legs had been swept out from under him, sent crashing down to the deck in an undignified manner. There was ice all around, but Riku got to his feet nonetheless, springing towards Zexion with his sword swinging in a horizontal arc before him.

Kairi had found her way towards the hatch leading down into the hull – with alarming ease, at that – but had to leap back as soon as she found it, blocked by the pair in combat. There was still too much mist, she couldn't quite make them out...

But she gasped, and tried to warn them when a hulking mass came at them. Her cry went unheard, and all she could do was fling herself out of Lexaeus's path.

He caught Riku by the back of his neck, hauling him up off his feet.

Saix overturned the gangplank as the last of the pirates made it over, Axel catching his breath a hair's width away. Demyx wasn't far, no longer within his watery shield. He had no more need of it.

Saix jerked his head towards the remains of the Highwind, and ordered both, “To the depths.”

Demyx's melody changed, the sea started to funnel out from underneath the ship to swallow it. Axel grinned, and released all control of the flames.

He wasn't real. Surely... Surely he couldn't be real. This was the last place Roxas would ever expect him to be, so... he just... couldn't be.

“Sora?”

It took Sora a moment longer to recover from his shock, but when he did, it was with a total disregard for the strangeness of his appearance.

“Roxas!” Overwhelmingly relieved, Sora started to lower his sword. “You're okay!”

The strange flashes of light, his gleaming eyes – those weren't registering. Roxas was whole, and here, and what more could matter?

But Roxas kept his sword raised, tense.

“You have to go.”
“You're coming with me, right? We'll get Riku, and Kairi, and -”

Wood burst and gunpowder combusted, a powerful surge of flame sending the Highwind up in an explosion. Sora was thrown forward, and Roxas's keyblade dissipated; he stumbled, grabbing at Sora's shoulders to keep them from being flung to the ground.

The fog was starting to disperse, with Demyx no longer perpetuating it.

The Highwind was gone, and he knew what that meant. The Captain was aboard the Never Was, soon to be captured if not caught already, and their orders were to leave none but him alive.

There was no time to make a plan, barely enough to get Sora away, if they were lucky.

“Get out of here now,” Roxas hissed.

“But you -”

“I can't go yet,” Roxas shook his head miserably. “Sora, please.”

At the sound of a loud, feminine cry, Sora's head sharply turned in search of it.

With the smoke cleared, Kairi could see. She watched something strike Riku hard, saw him spit blood out of his mouth, witnessed him struggling against Lexaeus's grip with his sword dangling from his hand.

Sora couldn't see them from there, but his decision was already – unwillingly – made. With one last look at Roxas and a sound of longing, he turned and bolted for Kairi.

Riku found his grip, spots dancing over his eyes, and it took an incredible amount of effort to stop struggling against the hold, and focus enough to attack instead. His sword was raised, clutched in both hands, and driven powerfully underneath his arm.

It cracked the stone, and Lexaeus was shocked into throwing him down.

“Finish the brat,” Vexen spat, still bringing himself up off the ground.

Sora staggered, grabbing Kairi's arm. She hardly noticed him coming, staring at the fighting in horror – she was frozen, sword half-wrenched from the sheath but helpless, all her basic training stubbornly not coming to mind.

So few soldiers remained, all of them caught in a slaughter and in no better shape to help Riku or Namine or Roxas than the two of them. Among the falling bodies was Saix, who was parting them with complete fixation on his target.

He'd spotted Riku's silver hair.

Resolve shaky, Sora tugged Kairi's arm, urging her, “We have to-”

“No!” Kairi tried to wrench herself away. “No, Namine, she's-...”

“I know,” Sora clutched her wrist, sounding pained, and pulled her behind the cover of some smashed-open crates. It was poor, but it would serve; the bodies around them were almost a better barricade. “We'll come back for them, I promise, but now...”

He craned his neck around, searching for Riku.
“You, boy,” Saix growled, and Lexaeus's tomahawk locked in place before it could tear into him. The last flicker of a chance to fight sank with Riku's ship, and he knew he was going to be overwhelmed.

In spite of everything, he had underestimated them, and his men... he had lead them like lambs to slaughter.

Riku rolled aside, grabbing his sword from where it fell. He would only die fighting. He refused to let it happen any other way.

“Sora!” he yelled, as loudly as he could. “Take her away!”

They were alive, somewhere. Riku couldn't see them but he was sure that they must be.

Even though there were a scarce half-dozen men still fighting for their lives... Sora and Kairi would have escaped the Highwind. Riku had to believe that.

Sora was stronger. A better protector.

They would be safe.

Xemnas descended from the quarter deck. With a casual air, he stepped over bodies and paid no heed to the dying Navy, uninterested in anyone but the young Captain.

If nothing else, Riku's command strengthened Sora's will. Leaving meant giving up on Roxas's rescue, Namine's recovery. It meant abandoning his friend and lover, maybe to his death. But it also meant heeding the only wish he knew for certain that Riku had, which was to keep Kairi safe. He would live to fight another day, try again, and Riku would loathe for him to die in vain. He wouldn't want to be rescued at anyone else's expense.

Sora had less than a second to come to terms with it all, and in that time, he spotted the lifeboat. Already prepared and hanging over the side, with the corpses of five soldiers all heaped and hanging off the railing.

It was their chance of escape.

“... Come on.”

“But Riku -...” Kairi almost sobbed.

Ice was binding Riku to the deck, and he couldn't wrench his limbs free of the frost fast enough before it built up higher. Vexen looked immeasurably pleased.

“Riku can do this,” Sora swallowed hard, and forced himself to believe it. If he didn't believe it, he had nothing else to crush the need to run back, rescue him or die trying, and reason would have no standing. “We'll come back for them. All of them. But I can't let them have you, too.”

If they bothered taking her prisoner at all. For all he knew, they might kill her as carelessly as the others before even finding out who she was. Every possibility seemed even worse than the last.

Tears spilled over Kairi's face, but she nodded. Together they crept over to the side of the ship, over the bodies.

The pirates were congregating around Riku – those who were not taking care of the very few survivors. They had to work fast, and Sora only allowed himself one glance back before he dropped
No time, no time for worry, no time for fear.

“Pull down on that rope,” he pointed and whispered, as loudly as he could for Kairi's sake but afraid, so afraid they'd be caught. “As hard as you can. Ready? And...”

The two of them wrenched at the ropes, Kairi's hands burning with the friction and not lowering her side nearly as fast as Sora.

The boat tipped to one side. Both of them were lurched, and Sora grabbed at the ropes to help.

It was too slow. He couldn't keep rushing between sides, banging them loudly against the hull with each precious distance they lowered themselves.

“Your knife,” he urged, straining a little. “Cut the rope.”

Better they fall the rest of the way than be caught here like rats in a trap. Sora could hear the last few screams fading. It wouldn't be long before they were noticed, now.

“Right!” Having a task seemed to permeate the panic, and Kairi set herself to sawing through the rope with the stunted blade tethered to her leg. Sora drew his out and worked frantically, cutting away strand after strand, and only stopped her when the ropes were worn down to single, fraying coils.

“Hold on. As tight as you can.”

Kairi nodded, quickly sheathing her knife and gripping the edges of the boat hard. Sora's knuckles were almost white against the boat, and for her sake, he did not close his eyes.

The strands stretched, snapped, and broke under the weight. Kairi felt her stomach leap to her throat. The boat dropped heavily into the water, almost ten feet below.

There was no use in fighting anymore. Riku was subjected to Saix's appraisal, gold eyes raking him critically.

“The Highwind's Captain, a mere child?” Saix determined he was the right one, but it seemed almost preposterous. Indeed, Vexen thought so, sounding incredulous in his disdain.

“This is their Captain?”

Riku's eyes narrowed, chin up. He was about to die. Nothing he said mattered, anymore. “This mere child has come closer to bringing your ship down than anyone in decades.”

“Is that what you think?”

The pirate crew parted for Xemnas, and Riku felt the cold encasing his limbs as acutely as though they were knives.

Never before had he laid eyes on the Captain of the Ship That Never Was, and never once would he
have thought his face would be so familiar. The spitting image of his father, but the face Ansem wore in Riku's nightmares; a little sharper, a little more visibly cruel.

He felt like a little boy, wielding a wooden sword, facing down the worst monster he could imagine. Those eyes were stripping him of his clothes, his skin, his dignity, his strength.

Worst of all... Xemnas seemed to know it. There was something in his expression, something he'd seen in his father but never had a word for.

“Bring him up,” Xemnas commanded, and the ice receded. Lexaeus pried him from the deck, twisting his wrist to make Riku drop the sword. He bit back a sound of pain, his wrists locked in large hands and feet barely touching the ground again.

He didn't even struggle. He wanted to, just to prove that he could. For whatever reason, Riku felt incapable.

“Captain of the Highwind... Son of the Admiral.” Xemnas inspected every inch of him, very slowly. “Is that who you are?”

Riku glared, and kept silent.

“He has the look of the Admiral,” Saix intoned. “And the pride of a noble brat.”

While the others tried to get a better look at their new captive – Xigbar, in particular, was showing great interest – Roxas kept back and stared at the spot where Sora had disappeared over the side. No one else had been paying them enough attention to take notice of their escape, but Roxas had done nothing else. He'd almost went to help them.

But he hadn't. He hadn't wanted to draw attention to it.

He thought he heard a splash.

“Yes,” Xemnas mused, greed evident all over his face. “And he's strong.”

With no other way to fight, Riku spat in his face. It slid down Xemnas's cheek, tinged red.

Saix's claws were instantly at his throat, but those eyes were no longer on him. Riku considered that a victory, however small.

“Saix,” Xemnas wiped at his cheek, tone even. “I want him intact.”

“Sir.”

Riku was trying to crane away even as the hand was removed, the barest punctures left behind. Saix had reserved his strength, knowing better than to crush his windpipe as he'd so desired.

If anything, though, the show of mercy was unwelcome.

“... You're not going to kill me?” Riku demanded, gut twisting into knots at the thought. He didn't want to know what happened to their prisoners.

It wasn't even his own suffering that he was thinking of. If he learned what they did, found out it wasn't something a person could live with having suffered...

He would have preferred to die with the hope that Namine would one day be alright. Namine, and Roxas.
He wasn't aware that Roxas was watching him, now. Now that Roxas had a second to breathe, he was almost bursting with questions about Riku and the girl who Sora had risked himself for. Already, he was trying to devise ways of sneaking down to get a better look at him, if he was to be kept in the brig. Roxas didn't imagine he'd be kept anywhere else.

Or, if only he could see Namine again... he was sure she'd have answers.

“I can think of many uses for a young Captain,” Xemnas replied cruelly. Xigbar leaned in closer, over the Captain's shoulder.

“Could get a lot of use out of this one...”

Familiar with that dangerous leer, Roxas thought he should have felt sympathetic, but was only numb.

Riku grit his teeth, skin crawling. “Whatever you think you can get out of me... You won't.”

As though inspecting it, Xemnas ran his fingers through Riku's hair, his touch becoming a pull as Riku tried to jerk away. “The Captain will be bound and kept in the brig,” he ordered, not thinking Riku's refusal worthy of reply. “No one is to touch him aside from myself... And I want him kept strong.”

Xigbar backed off a little, looking rather like he'd just been denied a treat.

“Never fear, boy,” Xemnas gripped Riku's chin, muttering to him. “This will not be for long.”

Like a conditioned response, Riku flinched at the word 'boy'. Xemnas let go, and turned away.

“Set sail for the Isle of Oblivion.”

Riku jerked and struggled, ability renewed, as his arms were brought down for the pirates to start tying him up. There were hands everywhere, ropes going around his arms and wrists, and cloth pulled taut between his teeth to gag him, keep him from trying to bite. His yells were muffled, and drowned out by the laughter and bawdy remarks being exchanged by Xigbar and Luxord, while Larxene slipped in to whisper threats against his ear.

Axel only observed from a distance, arms crossed, and felt like a few more pieces of the puzzle had just been handed to him.

He could just about make out the whole picture.

Shock pulsed horribly up through Sora's body, but as far as he could tell, he hadn't been injured in the fall. More miraculous still, the boat hadn't overturned or been broken through in the fall – it was still rocking violently, but it would steady. Though his lungs seemed unwilling to breathe yet, he forced out the words, “Are you hurt?”

Kairi was tense, aching all over, but mostly she was surprised they weren't dead. “I d-don't think so...”

“Good.” Sora immediately pried up the oars. He didn't have nearly strength enough to row out of the path of the wreckage, but that didn't mean he wouldn't do it anyway.
“Wait—... Let me help you.”

Kairi crawled over to sit next to him, cramming them side-by-side. She took one of the oars, to Sora's surprise.

He wouldn't have expected a Princess to help, no matter what the situation... Not when she was undoubtedly as worn out as he was. She hadn't even stopped crying.

But... he wasn't in any position to turn down help.

“Okay, on my count.”

Kairi knew what to do. She had been here before, remembered the rocking, and the cold, and the steady, endless counting of the dying First Mate, even as his strength waned and Kairi had to take up an oar to keep them going the last distance.

Just like last time, Namine was beyond her reach, beyond her help, and now Riku, too. Once again, Kairi was rescued, protected, while those she needed to protect were pulled farther and farther from her reach.

One by one, they would take everything she had from her.

She took a shaky breath, trying not to cry any harder. “Where do we go...?”

Tears had tracked down Sora's cheeks as well, but he swallowed down sobs. In the most fragile way, he kept his voice steady. “We're not far from shore. If we keep following the smoke, it shouldn't take more than a day to reach the harbor.”

More than ever, Kairi was terrified by the prospect of returning home. She didn't even know what she'd find there... Or, worse, what she wouldn't find. “The Kingdom? Don't we need to follow them?”

“Someone needs to know what happened. We have to tell your parents. We have to—... have to tell the Admiral.”

Kairi didn't argue. She nodded, once, and clamped her lips together to keep any more hiccuping breaths trapped in her throat.

They turned the boat to Radiant Garden, the smoke still thick above the Kingdom, and rowed on Sora's count.
Chapter 21

It had been less than an hour before the fog cleared completely, and the Never Was had sailed far out of sight. Though there had never been any hope of following in a rowboat, it still felt like an opportunity had slipped out of his grasp like sand, and Sora could hardly breathe. It was taking all the strength in his body to keep rowing, and to resist tears.

Radiant Garden was still their burning beacon. Sora wondered when all the fires would be put out. He wondered if there was anyone left alive to do so. How much had been razed, though, that it would burn so consistently?

His muscles were afire, too... Sora thought every row might be the one to tear apart his arms, but he had to go on, until -

“There's another ship!”

Kairi had chanced a look around and gasped her words instead of spoken them, almost incomprehensible for it. Sora whipped around, regardless, snapping out of his exhausted haze.

A large vessel, cutting through the waters at top speed. It couldn't have come from the Kingdom, but near enough to it; one of their flag ships, perhaps? A ship from the fleet of back-up Riku had requested?

“You're right... Is that-...?”

“Yes!” Kairi squinted to make out the flags, regaining some life back. “It's from the Kingdom!”

Those colors were distinct. They were safe.

“Try to signal them!”

Kairi carefully stood up in the boat, which tilted and shuddered under the shifting weight, and began waving her arms frantically. Sora still rowed, but very slow, trying to bring them in closer to the ship to make shouting worthwhile. All appearances of dignity had been utterly abandoned; Kairi hollered, kept waving, looked for any sign that they'd been spotted and would be rescued.

The ship's passage slowed, and word passed very quickly from the crow's nest.

Kairi lowered herself back to the oar, helping Sora with renewed determination. They could see the ship weighing anchor, were so close now that they could watch uniformed men in their own lifeboat being expertly lowered over the side. They remained tethered, prepared to come back aboard with their new passengers.

The moment they were close enough to make contact, Sora dropped the oar with an enormous exhale of relief, arms shaking badly. The Naval officers pulled their boat in, one man bowing his head deeply to Kairi and offering her a hand.

“There's another ship!”

“Thank you...” Breathlessly, Kairi accepted the help but couldn't keep her balance regardless. She stumbled between the boats, knees knocking together.

Sora crouched in anticipation of crossing between as well, but no move was made to help him.
“They’ll haul us up momentarily, Your Highness,” the officer helped Kairi sit down.

She nodded politely, then turned her head. “Sora?”

Wobbling, he stood. “Just be a moment, Kai-... Your Highness,” he corrected quickly, aware of their new company. What passed as ‘acceptable’ with Riku wouldn’t, with these people...

In a highly undignified display, Sora flailed and clung on his way into the boat, taking a moment to even make the short jump over. Under orders to only assist the Princess, the officer only watched him impassively before signaling to the men at the top.

There was a lurch as the boat was hoisted out of the water, pulled high. Sora arranged himself at the end farthest from Kairi, hoping to put forth the picture of someone deserving of the utmost respect. He was starting to hope that they’d be able to follow much faster than he thought.

It hadn’t been all that long; if they could catch up, save Riku before anything terrible happened to him...

And recover Roxas, and Namine...

The lifeboat was efficiently brought up past the words emblazoned on the hull; 'Hollow Bastion'. It only took one more heave to bring them up where the ship's leader stood in wait, Ansem striding forward in the full uniform of an Admiral and with a cool, detached politeness as he assisted Kairi over the side.

Sora was gripped with the strangest mix of relief and fear. The Admiral cut an imposing figure, and he hadn’t expected that he would need to explain what happened to Riku so soon, to his father.

“Your Highness. It’s a relief to see you safe.”

“Admiral, thank goodness...”

Kairi daintily took his hand, courtly manners reflexive. Sora once again needed to make his own way over the side.

“We anticipated a need to come upon the Highwind before finding you,” Ansem appraised them both. Kairi was very aware of her appearance, under his gaze – her hair chopped short and her masculine clothes streaked with soot and blood. She was sweat-soaked and stained, more beleaguered than someone in her station should ever be.

She hesitated. “We... We were aboard the Highwind...”

Sora saluted. “Sir, we can tell you everything that happened in the attack on the Never Was -”

“Then it is as we feared,” Ansem coldly interrupted. “The Highwind attempted to return to the Kingdom, following the attack. What of the ship?”

“... It-...” Sora glanced at Kairi, who hung her head. He swallowed hard, and reported in as calmly he could manage, “It’s gone. The Highwind was destroyed.”

Ansem was quiet for a second while he absorbed that, his voice level. “... And her Captain?”

Sora went quieter. “Captain Riku was taken prisoner. His last order was for me to take Her Highness to safety. The rest are dead, I think...”

Silence met this news. Something in Ansem's gaze gleamed sharper.
“They aren't far yet,” Kairi spoke up. “Riku could still be alive, and we know Lady Namine is still on board, as well as a third prisoner...”

She sneaked a glance at Sora, but he did not look back. He hadn't told her about his encounter with Roxas. “That's right.” Sudden doubt punctured Sora's hopes. “But I'm not sure pursuing them will do any good...”

Kairi's expression went a little slack with shock. “Sora...”

“These pirates...” Sora's heart quaked, feeling despair like actual pins piercing it through. “They can't just be beaten with swords. We thought we were ready to face them, but the Highwind stood no chance from the start.”

Ansem's expression had not changed even slightly, and when he spoke, it was utterly devoid of emotion. “I would expect no other advice from you, boy, and would also have you hold your tongue.”

Any other time, Sora would have felt the need to argue and fight back, insist that the Admiral hear him out before more lives could be lost. Instead, he just went quiet.

Vaguely betrayed by Sora's suggestion, Kairi spoke up sharply instead. “Admiral, we must make pursuit now, or... Or they'll both be lost to us.”

“Never fear, Your Highness. I find that warning very suspect.” Ansem advanced on Sora. “It is curious, to me, that the attack on our Kingdom followed the departure of its elite defenders by sea. Did you know, boy, that the Royal Family was informed of the Princess's mysterious departure? That they would be sending us after her?”

He didn't immediately understand what he was being accused of. “I knew Riku-... The Captain sent a message after we found her on board... I didn't know who they would send...”

“It is fascinating that in your wake, chaos follows in the form of the Ship That Never Was,” Ansem's eyes were very narrow, voice silky. “An attack on Twilight Town. On Radiant Garden. The Highwind... The abduction of the crown Princess and the ship's noble Captain. Strangest of all how you wrestle free of all these encounters intact, an 'escaped prisoner' of a crew who takes none.”

Kairi caught on much faster. Her brow knit, taking a step between them. “I don't find this suggestion at all appropriate.”

It clicked, and all at once, Sora's anger flared to life. His posture changed entirely in his offense, standing at his full height with legs apart, sturdy and strong.

“Are you saying you think I helped them?”

“Unfortunately, Your Highness, propriety is not priority following an attack on your Kingdom,” Ansem explained coldly. “The timing of your disappearance was all too convenient, for the Never Was, and the destruction that followed would never have happened without it. All the more easily perpetrated with an informant.”

“Running away was my own decision,” Kairi defended hotly. “Neither he nor Riku had any part in it. Sora has dedicated himself to the protection of my life, I will not have that rewarded with accusations of treason.”

“Those pirates nearly killed me, they took my brother and my friend,” Sora glared. “Do you want me to show you the scars I have because of them?!”
Ignoring Sora completely, Ansem spoke with the sort of cutting sternness Kairi had heard him use on Riku whenever he'd misbehaved as a child. “This boy has dedicated something to keep you within his custody and led the Captain of the Highwind to his capture, at the cost of thousands of lives,” he thrust one finger in the direction of Radiant Garden. “If your independence played even the slightest part in that, Your Highness, those deaths are on your head as well.”

Taken aback, Kairi sputtered a bit, then lapsed into silence. 'Your Highness' sounded patronizing, from his lips, and the onslaught of guilt was destructive. She was starting to feel crushed by Ansem, unable to fight for either herself or for Sora.

In an attempt to make up for that, Sora stepped forward. “You're grieving for your son just as much as we are, Sir, but there's only them to blame.”

“Grieving?” Ansem repeated, turning to Sora at last. “I have yet to bury Riku. The Hollow Bastion will pursue and I intend to recover my son, and you will be tried in front of the Kingdom's law...” his lip curled. “Whatever is left of it.”

Kairi had begun to find her emotional footing when Ansem ordered his men, “Take the boy to a cell.”

“I do not accept this,” she protested, loudly.

Sora's fists clenched. Being accused of treason should have terrified him, but he hated so much more that anyone could ever think he'd let this happen to Riku. If he'd had any other choice...

They never would have been separated.

“It's fine... He's made up his mind about me.”

The officers around them were fetching irons, and Ansem stepped closer to the two of them and lowered his voice. He spoke to Sora, but to Kairi too in the process of creating an element of privacy.

“I saw you seducing my son to folly well before now. It is the misguided mercy of Her Highness that you live until your trial.”

Sora's jaw dropped, too stunned to hide his reaction or deny everything the way he should have.

Kairi's face went pink with fury, and she could only watch as Sora's wrists were wrenched forward and a pair of manacles locked around them.

He finally shut his mouth, teeth clenching. Sora didn't fight the officer.

“Your Highness,” Ansem began to turn away. “We will provide you the means to clean yourself up and a dress to change into. Quarters will be prepared... And I would prefer you do not leave them.”

With a stiff curtsy, Kairi almost huffed, “Admiral.”

Sora only glimpsed her once more before he was forcibly steered below deck, and heard someone call to bring up the anchor.

They would pursue the Never Was, no more prepared than the Highwind, and Sora didn't think he'd be able to pull off another escape with Ansem standing between him and Kairi, holding the keys to his shackles well out of reach.
Riku's hands were bound behind his back, fingertips numb more often than not.

He'd been bound perhaps excessively, in his opinion, ropes around the entirety of his arms and torso. They kept him stiff, making it impossible to bend or stand. It had taken him some time to wrestle himself upright in order to sit against the cell wall. The only way he could get to his feet was with help, and... to his immense humiliation... 'help' was provided fairly regularly.

In his position, he could not feed himself of the like. Someone would come down to 'take care of him' (most often the vicious man who had nearly clawed his throat), and Riku would be fed or watered or whatever else was necessary before being shoved back to the floor.

Riku would be forced to spend the next several minutes crawling towards the wall on his knees, and collapse back against it. He was no longer gagged, at least, but he saw no point in speaking or trying to fight back needlessly.

Pointless struggling was a sign of being weak. It was something children did.

If he struggled, it would just get worse.

Hair fell forward into his face, staring at darkness and thinking obsessively. Kairi and Namine – he'd failed them, and now one or both could be dead or even worse. Sora – he'd risked his life, so bravely, so wonderfully noble, so strong and lovely... And for days, Riku had been cold to him without reason.

Had he found safety...?

Riku thought of Sora most often, admittedly. He wished their last few days could have been spent differently. He wanted...

On the stairs, Roxas footsteps were very light and careful. For days, he had been trying to find the time to get to Riku, almost able to hear the ticking clock going down and not knowing when the timer would stop. They were going top speed towards the Isle of Oblivion, but Xemnas had not told anyone how long the journey would take or how they were really getting there. Roxas had worried he wouldn't even get a chance to slip away before the Superior's plans were put into action. He'd taken great care to sneak away at the very first opportunity, when no one would expect him or be present down here attending to their prisoner...

The dark and the smell were both chillingly familiar.

He approached the only occupied cell, perhaps quieter than he should have been. It didn't matter, anyway; Riku expected death to come at any time, now, and didn't even flinch at an unexpected voice.


Riku lifted his head, but didn't look towards him. He assumed someone had come to taunt or question him. The latter had yet to happen. The former already had.

Staring in, Roxas sat down on the damp floor. “... I know what it's like to be in one of these cells.”

At that, Riku turned his head slowly, eyes widening very slightly.

“... Roxas?”
The resemblance was nearly exact. There was no one else it could be.

“You know my name,” his eyebrows raised.

“Sora...” Riku seemed stunned. “He's been looking for you.”

“So you do know Sora well... Or at least well enough to know that.” He supposed Sora might actually tell anyone that he was looking for his twin brother.

“He talked of you often... About rescuing you from the pirates,” Riku stared, the glow of Roxas's eyes disconcerting. He could still make out familiar features past them... The line of his jaw, the softness of his cheeks. He looked so unmistakably like Sora that Riku could have confused them, were their coloring not different.

“How did my brother end up on a ship like yours?”

It didn't occur to Riku that this could be some manner of interrogation to which he was responding willingly. His private promise to himself not to say anything seemed somehow invalid, when it was about Sora. “... I found him adrift... Pulled him up when he was on the brink of death.”

Momentarily quiet, Roxas tried to figure out if that was some manner of boast. “Was he injured, then? Lash wounds?”

“Lash wounds, more water in his lungs than air... It was the fever that nearly killed him.” Riku's head tilted back, wondering if Sora was in a similar state now. His heart throbbed. “He was delirious for weeks. I thought... There were times I didn't think he'd make it, but he's strong.”

Merely hearing about what his brother had suffered felt like being hollowed out. “I owe you my thanks, then... You saved him when I couldn't.”

“You owe me nothing,” Riku muttered, almost inaudibly. He wanted nothing from Roxas.

It was... surprising, how quickly Riku had already come to hate him. Resent, perhaps, should have been a better word... A more appropriate one. Sora would choose to stay with Roxas over Riku, after all, and while Riku would have loved to say that he understood he just couldn't. Family love was important, but...

... But... he'd never choose Ansem over Sora. He loathed that it wasn't the same way for them both.

It should have fostered resentment, but those glowing eyes had made it into more. Riku hated him.

“... I do have questions, though,” Roxas put forth about momentary silence.

“About Sora?”

“Mainly, yes.”

He would not begrudge him that. Sora would have done anything just to know a little about how Roxas was doing, what was happening to him. “... Then ask away.”

“First,” Roxas narrowed his eyes. “Why did you bring him back, when he barely survived last time?”

“I told you. He's been trying to find you,” Riku responded darkly.

“He still shouldn't have come. What if...” His teeth clenched, apparently unable to speak aloud
whatever the worst case scenario was in his mind.

“We must know a different Sora. Mine would let nothing stand in the way between him and his
brother.” Not even Riku.

“‘Yours’?” In contrast to the coldness, Roxas's response was heated.

Surprisingly, Riku almost flinched and quickly became stoic and quiet. “... Slip of the tongue.”

Roxas exhaled heavily. “Sora doesn't know when to stop. He'll charge headlong into his own death
if someone doesn't hold him back. He should have been brought somewhere safe.”

Riku said nothing.

More to himself, Roxas trailed off to a murmur. “He wasn't... supposed to see.”

“... See that you've become a pirate?”

It didn't come off as an accusation, but it probably would have been better if it had. Roxas had
surprisingly little conviction in correcting, “That I've done what I had to.”

“Become a monster.”

Almost springing to his feet, the remaining foundation of his denial crumbled. “I was already a
monster,” Roxas admitted quietly. “Sora gave me the chance to be something different, that's all.”

“Whatever you are doesn't matter,” Riku declared, drained. “He'll still choose you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Once he makes sure the Princess is safe, he'll come for you again.”

They both knew it to be true. Roxas's shoulders dropped, tension balled up in his lungs and pushed
out in a sigh.

He wondered... if he should tell him. Riku had been involved in this for much longer than either he
or Sora, and in the line of duty saved his brother. Kept alive Roxas's only chance at humanity and the
only person who would ever mean so much to him. Did he owe Riku for that? In some manner or
other... Roxas was in the young Captain's debt.

“... You know the princess's... sister.”

“Namie.”

Roxas nodded. “She's here. I'm looking for a way off of the ship, as soon as I can. But not without
her.”

Truly, Riku wanted that to be a relief. He tried allowing it to be. “... Good.”

“If there's a way to free you, too, when that happens... I'll try.” Roxas did not soften or grow
sympathetic. “But I doubt you'll be kept alive that long. Sorry.”

“You say that as though I didn't already know.” Riku was only confused as to why he wasn't dead
yet.

“I don't know what they've been telling you. I don't know what they want from you. Maybe they'd
offer you your life, if you turned out to be like -” The word 'us' died on the back of his tongue and left a foul taste. “- me.”

Riku's eyes narrowed faintly. “... Unfortunately for me... I'm nothing like you. Better I die.”

“Then you're lucky.”

Turning over his palm, Roxas produced an uncontained ball of light – it was like he'd pulled a star down from the sky. It lit up both faces properly, illuminating Riku's shocked stare and Roxas's blank disappointment written on a face like Sora's.

“Namine likes this trick,” Roxas dully informed him, “but maybe you'd prefer the dark.”

Unthinkingly, Riku went tense and whispered, “No -...”

They both faltered, Roxas taking another look at his face with a tiny bit of surprise. He hadn't intended that as a threat, but it almost looked to have been taken as one.

“... For my brother's sake, then.” He put his hand through the bars and made a flicking motion, casting the light off his hand. It drifted through the air to remain suspended above Riku's head, lighting the cell not like a lantern, but more like daybreak.

Riku sank back into the wall, face tilted up to the light. He'd been so tired of the dark.

“... Could you do one other thing for Sora? For me, more so, I guess...”

Regardless of whether or not Riku survived – though he truthfully didn't believe that he would – he was certain Roxas had a better chance of seeing him again. All he could do now was try to repair some of the damage he'd undoubtedly carved into Sora's heart.

“What is it?”

He couldn't look at Roxas when he said it. “I loved him until the end. I want you to tell him.”

That had plainly not been what he'd expected. Roxas went stock-still and turned red, having difficulty processing his immediate reaction. Disgust? Anger? Protectiveness?

He was all the more curious about the Captain's relationship with his brother, now, but he also desperately didn't want to know. Knowing Riku was likely being taken to his death and that he'd loved Sora... Would it be better or worse, he wondered, if Sora loved him back?

Regardless... It was Riku's last request. Stiffly, he agreed, “I can tell him that.”

“Thank you,” Riku said, toneless. It wasn't good enough, but it was all he could do now.

“... Goodbye, then, if I don't see you before this ends.”

With a barely perceptible nod, Riku angled his face to see him again. “In a strange way, I'm glad I met you, Roxas.”

He wasn't only grateful to employ him as a messenger, though he honestly was relieved for that chance. Just... Having some connection to Sora again, and to Namine after so long, was a merciful gift for the universe to bestow on him.

He just had to hope that Roxas would keep his word. Free her, take her away and meet with Sora and Kairi. That the two of them would be whole, and move on from this.
Riku looked back up towards the light.

“I'm glad to know Sora had someone on his side,” Roxas muttered, turning to head back towards the stairs. He wanted to leave the brig behind and never go back.

And he wanted to see Axel.

His feet carried him the familiar path – inherently strange in that familiarity, because he still swore that sometimes the ship's interior changed purely to disorient. The experience was akin to that first time he discovered his power over light; distant, vague, heavy.

He didn't really think, the entire way there. When Roxas reached the door, he tried to open it without even considering knocking, and wasn't honestly surprised when it didn't work.

Only a fool left their door unlocked, when they lived on a ship of thieves. Roxas hadn't considered that Axel might be elsewhere, though, and it stood to reason that he might be.

The lock turned, and the door opened.

So fortune favored them both enough to be in the same place at the same time. Roxas stared up at him, not recognizing the shadows under his eyes, the tiny crease between his brows. Axel had been thinking, perhaps running himself a little ragged in all his monopolizing.

Or maybe the battle had tired him. He had reduced an entire ship to a burnt shell shortly after engulfing a whole kingdom in flame, and Roxas didn't know how someone recovered after expending so much energy. He'd glimpsed Demyx sleeping in one of the hammocks below deck just yesterday without anyone even disturbing him; Demyx was almost always sharing someone's bed, so to be genuinely passed out when they could have been forcing him to speed along the waters or into depraved positions was unexpected.

Axel, though. He couldn't tell if he'd gotten any rest whatsoever, yet. Roxas had hardly been able to find him, unless it was conferring with Saix, or Marluxia.

“... Can I...?”

Axel stood aside. “Come in.”

With a sort of grunt, Roxas walked inside and went straight for the bed, not even sparing the treasure chest a glance. Unusual, to say the least. Axel locked the door again.

“It's not often I find you alone, anymore.”

“Everyone wants to hear what I have to say, suddenly,” Axel turned towards him. “Guess that's how you know something big is happening.”

“I still don't know what I have to do with it. And the prisoner, even less...” Roxas twisted the ragged blanket in his fingers, staring down at them.

“... I think I do. I know some, not all, and there's guesswork involved.”

“Are you going to tell me?” Roxas sounded as tired as Axel felt.

“If I wasn't, I would have played dumb,” he pointed out, and managed to lift Roxas's head with mere words. “The young Captain factors into Xemnas's immortality. He's going to take this body.”

Roxas stared, unable to follow his meaning. “How does that have anything to do with immortality?”
“A young, strong body? As far as I can tell, he's fading. Or maybe we aren't as ageless as we thought.” Axel kept his voice down, moving slowly through his quarters towards the bed. “... It's guesswork. But I've been on this ship long enough to know what kind of guesses to make.”

Understanding was unpleasant. Roxas's lip curled in disgust. “He can do that?”

Just... take Riku's body, like a vessel to slip into... If that was what Axel meant, it didn't seem possible. It seemed horrific.

“He thinks he can, at least. But he doesn't only want the Captain's youth, he wants power.” Axel sank onto the bed. “And that's where you come in.”

He sounded unexpectedly grave. Roxas put his hands on his knees, at least an inch between himself and Axel.

“What 'power' can he get from me?” he scowled. Axel gave him a sidelong look.

“... You're the most powerful of all of us, Roxas. You haven't even started to uncover all of what you can do.”

Roxas shrunk a little further away, guarded. “Who told you that?”

“No one did. You could ask anyone, they could tell you the same.”

It was strange. Even with all of Axel's heat so close by, Roxas felt cold.

“It's because you're a twin,” Axel stated frankly. “I don't know why that's important, but we all know that it is.” He turned to Roxas, shifting on the bed. “... But Xemnas doesn't know everything I know, and Marluxia doesn't either.”

Roxas didn't really need to guess how he came by whatever information he was talking about. “Namie?”

Unexpectedly, Axel almost smirked. “No... She's told me some things, true, but she's outside our reach now.”

“Then how...?”

“This might come as a shock, Roxas, but I can have information all my own.”

Roxas searched Axel's face, trying to guess at what was going on in his head. Slowly, one warm hand ran through Roxas's hair.

“... They don't know I care about you, logic and emptiness be damned. So I'm not going to let them have you.”

His chest went tight, and Roxas leaned into his hand.

Axel, for a split second, thought he'd just lied to him. Said something easy to sway Roxas closer to his side – physically, it had done just that, closing the gap a little bit on the bed. Axel's very nature felt more like lies and less like fire, though maybe both were true.

How paradoxical. His true essence being a lie.

But that wasn't even the case. Roxas was something and he didn't even have the words for what. Axel could tell that Namine had been right, completely as expected. Roxas had changed something
in him, and he refused to go back to the way he used to be.

Axel wasn't sure if that was selfish or not. He wasn't sure if emotions were selfish, by virtue of existing. He didn't used to even wonder what selfishness was.

How interested he was, in finding out.

“Whatever happens... Remember that.”

“... You know, I don't even care if you're lying to me,” Roxas sighed softly. “Just... keep telling me you'll be on my side, in the end.”

Axel didn't even hesitate. “I will be.”

Roxas was his side, now.

He closed his eyes. “Good.”

With a subtle shift nearer, Axel's arm wrapped around him and Roxas sank into his side. He was too exhausted. He needed to believe Axel, and there wasn't room for doubt about it.

Axel just spent the moment of silence focusing on what was happening inside his chest and his head, trying to identify feelings, if he had them.

“... He was here...”

The break in the quiet had been building up. Axel had almost expected it.

“Who-... Sora was?”

“Yes,” Roxas confirmed distantly. “We almost attacked each other...”

“... Shit.”

Neither eloquent nor sympathetic, but that wasn't what he ever wanted from Axel, anyway.

“And still...” Roxas held his hands out, allowing light to fill his palms like a bright, hazy liquid.

“... You thought they'd go away?”

“I don't know what I thought would happen... Maybe it needs more time, or something else needs to change...”

Axel thought for a second. “In all the time you had together, you were never apart. Right?”

“Never longer than a few days...”

“ Took some time for your powers to kick in,” Axel pointed out. “Should work the same way, in reverse.”

Roxas let the light fade. “He saw me like this...”

“Tell him we did this to you. Or you were coerced,” he shrugged one shoulder. He said it as though it were simple; 'blame the pirates', as though it could be left at that.

Empty hands clenched.
“... What if I shouldn't go back?”

“You'd rather be like this?”

His eyes narrowed. “Of course not, but Sora-...” Roxas faltered, hands running back through his hair and almost tugging, like he was punishing himself.

“Don't make any decisions until you can talk to him,” Axel advised, almost warned.

Roxas ruminated, then – seemingly from nowhere – informed him, “He and the prisoner... They might have been lovers.”

Axel's eyebrows shot up.

“At least, he loves Sora...” Roxas lowered his head again, staring at the floor.

“... You know your brother best. Is there a chance Sora would love him?”

“... I don't know. I've never seen Sora in love...”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not that he would have a lover, no,” Roxas denied. “It's not like I'm any different...”

That did something, another unidentifiable little twinge in Axel. “Is that how you think of me?”

“Should I not?”

Axel could have been called many things to many people, but a 'lover' to none. The closest he would have thought he'd come was with Saix, but... Neither of them had been capable of love or even a pantomime of it. Whatever this was with Roxas... There still could not be 'love', but maybe whatever they had was closer to it. “Just surprised.”

“What am I, to you?”

“I've never been able to figure that out.”

Roxas shook his head a little, not sure if he expected a different answer. “In any case, Sora...” he sighed. “Since I lost him, I've only thought of how I need him. Never thought he might not... need me.”

“You think having a lover would mean he wouldn't?” Axel arched an eyebrow.

“Not when I'm this.”

“He only just learned that.”

“And if I'm involved in his lover's death?” Roxas almost snapped. He couldn't imagine trying to face Sora, knowing he'd played even the smallest part in Riku's terrible fate... Whether it was really death that awaited him, or something worse.

“... I won't let him die, if you're set on it.”

Roxas looked to him sharply. “You can change that?”

He did not seem to doubt that Axel could. With the offer made aloud, it seemed like Riku was a
bargaining chip between them instead, or a gift. Axel would consider his life, in the game he was playing, and they both already knew he was playing to win.

“I can try.” Inwardly, Axel lamented how much more complicated this would make things. “I won't promise anything.”

“Thank you...” Roxas exhaled.

“Only thank me if I succeed.”

“I'll do more than thank you if any of us come out of this alive.”

Axel smirked faintly, though his offer gave him more to regret. If only he wasn't so tired, he'd ravish Roxas while he was still sure they were both alive. “Quite the motivation.”

His lips tilted in return, but the pensiveness had not left Roxas. “Can I ask you something?”

“Hn?”

It felt a little foolish, to ask. Still, Roxas wanted to know. “It wouldn't be real, but... do you feel anything right now?”

“... Yes.”

Roxas relaxed marginally. “What is it?”

“I can't tell,” Axel confessed. “It's been too long for me to remember what name to put to things.” He thought for a second, suddenly a little faraway in his eyes. “It's... it's something that means I have to get you through this. Away from Xemnas. Back to Sora...”

While he watched Axel's face, something in Roxas seeming to untangle and lighten inside him. One hand rested over Axel's.

“... But I also want to keep you,” he concluded dryly. “I have trouble letting go of treasure.”

“You know I'm the same way.”

“I know.”

Roxas glanced down at their joined hands. “... Can I sleep here tonight?”

“Yeah,” Axel hadn't expected the question, but found that was exactly what he wanted. “Course.”

It was like some sort of weight had been removed from Roxas. He leaned forward to remove his boots, and Axel left room on the cot for him to lie down. He almost rolled into Axel's arms, though there was a faint tug at his burn in the process that made him wince.

“Still hurts?” Axel murmured.

“We might heal fast, but this goes deep...”

“It'll take a while.”

Roxas's head was bowed against his chest. “I don't even feel the wounds the Highwind's men gave me... But this hurts.”
Axel brought his head up a little, inspecting the raw-looking pink mark on his throat. “... I tried to
hold back.”

His head tilted back more. “I wish I could have liked it...”

“I wish that, too. I wish we'd had enough time to make you forget pain could ever be a bad thing.”

With the smallest of grins, Roxas angled himself higher to press his lips gently to Axel's. The kiss
didn't break so much as drift, as the two of them fell asleep.

The sort of gown befitting a princess was an utterly impossible thing to sneak around in. So, even
minimal, and somewhat sloppily fitted as it was – there had been no maid to help her dress, and she
was glad at least that meant she had to skip the corset – Kairi didn't try to hide her presence.

There was a sort of 'Royal stride' one learned in her position which, when used around ordinary
people, gave off the irrefutable impression that she had somewhere very important to be and knew
exactly how to get there. Head high and hands gently clasped, she strolled through the hull and was
stopped by no one.

... Almost no one. Calling on the knowledge she'd gained of a ship's anatomy from Sora and Riku,
she had managed to find her way to the brig without incident. Once there, a locked door and a guard
became the first things to bar her way.

The uniformed officer bowed to her, but didn't look at all surprised.

“Your Highness.”

Kairi did her best to stare down her nose at a man who stood at least a head taller. “I have business
with the prisoner.”

He looked even less surprised to hear that. “I'm sorry, Ma'am, but the Admiral has prohibited
visitation with the prisoner to all but himself.”

Kairi had no doubts anymore that she was doing exactly what Ansem expected. If not to keep her
from speaking to him, that order could only protect Sora, and clearly that wasn't his aim.

But Ansem wasn't here now, and though he'd relayed his orders with conviction, there was
something feeble in the way the officer addressed her. He'd never had to deny someone as important
as the crown princess in his life.

She had an advantage, however brief.

She stood even straighter, and summoned her most haughty tone. “The Admiral has the authority to
command his fleet and the men who serve aboard it, but even as his guest he cannot command me.”

Kairi had no idea if this was actually true. On his own ship, Ansem's word might outrank hers. But
this man plainly didn't know either, and she had sounded certain of it, and watched him hesitate.

“All the same, I believe he should be informed...”

“Inform him, then.” Gaining confidence in the pageantry she was putting on, Kairi spoke with equal
measure of carelessness and impatience. “You can call him down here and have him tell you himself, if you like, and we can see how much he appreciates you wasting his time as well as my own.”

In the moment that passed before he reached for his keys, Kairi could already see that she’d won.

Pushing the key into the door, the officer spoke as someone trying to get the last word in defeat, “Longer than ten minutes, and I will be sending word to him.”

“Thank you,” she answered with a disarming smile, the picture of congeniality as she folded her hands in front of her once again. “You may wait outside, and I will knock when I wish to leave.”

Sounding thoroughly humbled, the guard grunted, “Careful on the stairs, Your Highness,” and gave another short bow as Kairi descended into the dimly-lit room.

Only with the door closed behind her did she allow her shoulders to drop, and exhaled with all the adrenaline of what she’d just pulled off. Not enough time to reflect on it or congratulate herself, though. This would have to be quick.

“Sora?” she called softly, realizing late that he might not be the only one being held down here. Was it safe for her, after all?

No answer came, and lifting her skirt slightly she crept along the short row of cells, until she came to the very last. That spiked head was unmistakable, craned back against the wall, and now Sora’s face was visible, too. With his eyes closed in sleep, he looked almost relaxed, but the blackish-purple mark under his eye rather ruined the image.

Kneeling down next to the bars (and less than concerned with the risk to her dress) Kairi tried again, louder. “Sora.”

In Sora's dreams, so many voices had spoken his name that he almost didn't stir for this one. Riku's voice ordering him to save Kairi, Roxas turning him away in panic, Kairi pleading with him to go back... What did this voice want?

Becoming aware of the cell around him, and that perhaps this wasn't all in his head, Sora blinked a few times.

“Hm'what?”

“Please wake up, Sora, I don't have long...” The voice was Kairi's again, but clearer, and urgent.

All at once comprehension hit.

“Kairi!” Sitting up in a rush, Sora rubbed the bleariness away, trying to bring her into focus. “What is it? How did you get down here?”

“Royal influence isn't worth nothing, yet.” He saw her smile first, but it didn't remain long. “I only have a few minutes to talk before they tell Ansem I'm here.”

That got through. Sora shuffled to the bars, close enough that their knees almost brushed, and nodded to show his understanding.

Kairi could see now that his manacles had been removed. She reached through, taking his hand and nearly dropping it again with a gasp.

“You're like ice...”
“This is nothing,” Sora grinned, throat still a little raspy. “After the Never Was, these cells are kind of luxurious.”

He recognized his mistake in an instant, but not soon enough to take it back. With a tiny, “Oh,” Kairi had lowered her eyes out of his sight.

“Oh no, I didn't mean-” Sora blurted, trying to salvage this, save Kairi from his own stupid mouth. “Th-that could just be the cell I was in, and I'm pretty sure they didn't keep Namine in one of them anyway -”

Quiet as it was, Kairi's voice cut through his babbling. “Sora, it's alright. I understand, and I didn't come here to talk about that.”

The reminder was more hurt than she could recover from so quickly, but she was too aware of her time running out to linger.

Sora cleared his throat. “Right. So, what are you here for?”

“To make sure you're okay, first of all, but now I see you're injured.”

Feeling her eyes on his bruise, Sora brought his free hand up to cover it, and laughed, “What, this? Hah, you should see him.” The feistiness faded as quickly as it came, and he looked into her eyes when he spoke next.

“They're chasing the ship, aren't they? Nothing's changed?”

He knew it hadn't. Sora's words of warning had probably only encouraged Ansem.

“... They are. I'm not sure they know their way, though.” Kairi inhaled, and told him what little more she knew. “We came upon debris from the Highwind in very little time, but that was all. Most of it seems to be sunken now. I was kept in my quarters after that, so I can't be sure what orders were given, but I don't see what they have to give them a heading.”

Nothing. That was the answer they both knew. The trail of fog had vanished, and the Never Was had an entire ocean to lose its pursuers on now. Kairi and Sora had acted as a compass for the Highwind, but the idea of Ansem seeking their counsel was laughable.

“... That's good, I think,” Sora mumbled to the floor.

“Sora...” Kairi had begun to wring her hands, “I know you want to go after them. I know you want to track them down as soon as we can, rescue Riku and your brother before... before anything can happen to them.” She took a steadying breath, sounding a little desperate as she could avoid the question no longer, “So why did you say we should give up?!?”

In the wake of this question, Kairi's breath sounded quickened and short, but Sora said nothing. He looked into her face and considered his words, wondering how he could give her an answer good enough.

To make her see, he had to explain it exactly as the horrible conclusion had come to him.

“Since I’ve been down here, I thought a lot about it...” he began, with a little bow of his head. “No ship has ever caught up with the Never Was before, but we did. We could have lost them in the fog after the attack on the Kingdom, but we didn’t. And Ansem’s right, they don’t take captives unless they’re like us... but they did.”
“You're saying they let us catch up?” Kairi supplied. “But why? They couldn't have known I was on
board.”

She couldn't think of what else they'd be after, but Sora shook his head.

“No, they couldn't have. And anyway, they didn't come after you. They were going to kill all of us,
except Riku.”

That explained even less. “Riku doesn't have a twin, he couldn't possibly be like Namine...”

Like Namine and Roxas. The thought bubbled to the surface of Sora's mind, danced on his tongue,
but he didn't voice it.

Hours of quiet solitude had robbed him of the chance to put off thinking about it. With no distraction,
Sora couldn't run from the too-fresh memory of his brother. Dressed in a pirate's clothes, armed and
standing among their ranks... And the eyes...

Their burning blue haunted him, loomed out of the darkness behind his own closed eyes, and bled
into every dream. He knew that glow. The fever had left him with little memory of the night he'd
been tossed over the side of the pirate's ship, but he would never escape the cold light of their
collective gaze just before the rush of gravity overcame him.

Roxas's eyes... he couldn't ignore them. And he couldn't forget.

Somehow, Sora didn't even try to fight off the understanding. A lifetime of memories with Roxas,
and none of it felt as real as the memory of those eyes.

“I still don't know why Riku,” he murmured. “Maybe just because he was... he is Captain, or maybe
they knew who his father is, and they'll use him to weaken the Kingdom even more. I don't really
follow any of it...”

Kairi shut her eyes tightly, and tried to fend off the paranoia that this was somehow about her.
Namine gone, her Kingdom burned, and Riku taken - it all felt designed to cause her pain. Surely no
one would suffer from these things more than her. But why?

“The point is,” Sora continued, forcing his thoughts back on track, “I think Never Was can’t be
captured unless they want to be. Either this ship chases them forever and never finds them, or we’re
headed for another trap.”

A chill went through Kairi. She was starting to think he might be right

“Then what are you saying? We can never find them?”

Sora's forehead dropped against the bars.

“I don't know,” he admitted miserably. “I can't ever give up on finding them, but I don't know what
to do, anymore. Maybe with a few ships, we could hold them off long enough to free them, or
maybe a small enough crew could go without notice, but the Admiral isn't going to listen to me.” His
hand had become tight around hers, but the pain was better than numb fear. “And if we’re ambushed,
how can I protect you where I am? If something happens to you... then I failed you both.”

Once again, he didn't speak his thoughts, but Sora knew... If that happened, he deserved to be
executed.

Kairi had become sick of tears by now, and she forced back their renewed sting almost angrily.
“Sora, you've done so much to protect me already, and... I can't be that burden, anymore. Not to anyone.”

Sora hadn't been the only one with too much time to think. It all came back to this. For so long, others had treated her life as something far more precious than others, and she'd let them. This was what her precious, protected life had earned her – a life she would squander away alone atop all the deaths that had defended her.

“So, if the time comes, and we're attacked, I'll be the one to protect you.” She squeezed his hand back hard. “I won't let them hide me away. I'll find a sword and I'll free you somehow. That is, if I don't convince the Admiral of your innocence first.”

Kairi had managed to get her way with Riku, even with Orcus. Ansem was her next challenge.

“Kairi, no,” Sora protested, “I can't let you-...”

“You can't stop me. I'm sorry.”

She was right in that. Sora truly couldn't do anything from inside a cell, and there was no arguing with the bite in her words.

In her eyes, Sora could see that spark of determination he'd liked from the start.

“... Then get me out, if you can.”

“I promise.” Kairi glanced over her shoulder, certain her time was nearly up. “...I want to give you something.”

One hand wriggled inside her dress, searching, and with a start Sora made to cover his eyes. He hadn't quite made it there when he saw her remove something flat and small enough to fit in her hand.

In her open palm, Kairi revealed a handmade charm – five seashells woven together to form a star. She stared down at it for a moment, privately pleased that it hadn't suffered any damage on her journey. The tiniest of fond smiles formed on her face.

Sora waited, and just as he'd opened his mouth to ask, Kairi was speaking, hushed. “Namine and I used to make these charms together. Not quite like this – we don't have these shells in Radiant Garden. They're actually from your home, Sora.”

Gazing at the yellow-pink shells had stirred some recognition in Sora, but the memory felt ancient. He could just-... he could almost remember something he'd once known about these...

“Sailors... used to take them for good luck,” he recalled aloud, not knowing what the words would be before he'd already spoken them.

Kairi nodded. “Riku brought me some as a gift, not long after Namine was taken. A souvenir from one of his first voyages. I was... going to give it to Namine, but now I think I'd like you to have it.”

She looked up from the charm at last, and put her hand through the bars to offer it to him.

Sora stared, not daring to take it yet. He could see how staggeringly important this little star was to Kairi. It wasn't just her connection to Namine, but to Riku, as well. How could Sora take that for himself?
“Are you really sure? You made it for her...”

“I think if anyone needs luck now, Sora, it's you.” Sensing his thoughts of rejecting it, Kairi pressed it into his palm firmly. “It's for me, too. Everyone I care about is gone somewhere I can't reach, except for you. If you have this, I know we'll always find our way back to each other.”

Slowly, Sora's fingers closed around the wayfinder, and a strange feeling seemed to flow up his arm and into his chest. As if by magic, he felt stronger. He felt... connected.

“I'll keep it safe.”

“Thank you,” Kairi whispered, then pulled her hands away to stand up. “I should hurry back...”

“Right.” Sora hoped she wouldn't be in trouble now because of him. “Goodnight, Kairi.”

“Goodnight, Sora... And good luck.”

Sora laughed, holding the charm to his heart now. “You already gave me all the luck I need.”

Kairi's heart seemed to flutter, answering. “I guess I did.”

An odd sense of calm filled her as she returned to knock on the door. Her time hadn't been entirely used up, it seemed, and she thanked the officer as the door shut behind her.

Sora watched until she was out of sight, listened until the heavy sound of the door had echoed into silence once again, then sat back with a smile. He looked again at the seashell charm, then tucked it into his clothes, hidden and secure.

“Goodnight, Riku...”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay on this update! If you checked our tumblr, you saw our announcement that this week's chapter was going up Tuesday instead of Monday due to family visits and a sickly Muffin. If you don't follow our tumblr, I recommend it! That's how we're going to give you guys news! You can either check our AO3 profile for the link, or just type in 'lanternjawedstudmuffin' with the 'tumblr' and the 'dot com' and boom, that's us.

Hopefully this was worth the wait!

The Isle of Oblivion was a mere spit of dead land. Trees that were stripped bare clustered around a mass of rock jutting up from the water like an iceberg, and there was scarcely enough shore to dock. It was unfamiliar and unwelcoming, to the crew amassed on deck.

Stoic and suspicious, Saix gave all of those who would remain on board a sharp look, as though warning them into place. Within his grasp was Riku, whose restraints had been lessened to manacles behind his back. He had been bathed and changed into fresh clothes, a procedure that would have been a relief were the process not so humiliating.

With so little left in his power, all Riku could do was be silent and hold his head high.

Roxas had been commanded to stay at Xemnas's side, and he'd long since run out of ideas as to how he could resist those orders. With no knowledge as to what his part in the Captain's plan was, he thought he could only look for an opportunity when the time came.

Whenever that was.

He tried to rub the chill out of his arms as they descended the gangplank – four of them, all told, while the rest of the crew watched with gleaming eyes – and only caught a glimpse of Axel on the way. His eyes were forward, expression impassive.

If Axel was really protecting him, in some way... Had he already done it, somehow, or was he going to follow? How much did Axel know of what was going to happen?

Feet met ground, wet pebbles shifting and crunching underfoot. They seemed to sink under the weight, almost. Riku, being steered by the hand at his collar, skidded and stumbled, but recovered smoothly enough.

“We will not slow for any purpose,” Xemnas strode forward, destination apparently a clear shot in front of him. “If you tire, you will be dragged. You will follow instructions, or suffer beyond your comprehension. This place will consume all who do not know its secrets.”

It was obvious that he wasn't addressing Saix with this. Roxas's fists clenched nervously by his sides. Somehow, he didn't doubt that as a mere ghost story.

Saix didn’t wait long for Riku to respond. When no answer came within seconds, he forced his head down by hauling him forward. “Do you understand, boy?”
Riku almost gnashed his teeth, eyes obstinately narrow. His foreboding was insurmountable, all the more reason to tempt them into killing him before some unknown thing happened.

“You must think your stubbornness is accomplishing something,” Xemnas mocked coolly.

“If the Captain did not require you intact, believe me, I would show you how cheek is rewarded on our vessel,” Saix threatened, and seemed to long to put his violent fantasies into action.

“I shall assume that the Captain of a prized ship has enough intelligence to heed me.” Xemnas moved on through the trees, all of which appeared to be dried out and dead. They were almost blackened. Stranger still, no leaves, even those long-dead, crunched underfoot. A layer of black flakes coated the hard earth like ash. It muffled their steps eerily, and seemed to cloak their footprints seconds after they’d been made.

It made them near-impossible to follow, and there would be no trail to follow if one of their number tried to come back this way alone.

Roxas hastened to keep in step, saying nothing, and glanced back over his shoulder in the attempt to catch Riku's eye. He lifted his head again, and glimpsed Roxas in return.

He wondered if it would be a mercy to kill Riku, himself, before this ritual went ahead... but, selfishly, he wasn't certain if that was worth getting himself killed for.


Xemnas was silent as he led them through the dead forest, a stiff breeze enough to flake blackened shavings off fragile tree trunks. By rights, they should not have still been standing, and they likely would topple at the slightest touch. Xemnas wove them around a serpentine path of his own invention, bringing them to jagged inclines of stone.

As was not apparent from the ship, the rock was just as unusual. The weathering to it suggested it was very old, but no natural-formed rock was cut in such a way. Someone had to have leveled it, once, or carved through some other means; the stone made a strange, twisting array of steps, all too wide to simply climb in one bound.

Xemnas stepped effortlessly from one to the other, too impatient to be anything but efficient.

Roxas slowed, as he climbed. His shorter legs didn’t do him any favors here, and he fell farther behind with every step. Saix, like Xemnas, climbed as though their shapes were familiar, but did not offer Riku a chance to get either his bearings or his balance.

Jagged rock caught Riku's ankle and dragged it under him, when Saix pulled too fast. Riku bit down on nothing and buckled, the scraping sound followed by skittering clacks. Bits of the stone had crumbled and fallen.

Better it than Riku, but Xemnas did not slow at all.

“Pathetic.”

Riku grit his teeth, fixing his footing in the brief moment he had. Saix carried on dragging him as though he was nothing more than cargo, unhindered by the weight.

Roxas was starting to feel the strain in his thighs and lungs, by the time they reached the highest point of the rock. Rather than a peak, the stunted mountain ended in a plateau, and an enormous circular formation sunken into the stone.
His eyes widened slightly, another chill crawling down his spine like a bead of sweat.

Xemnas stopped right at the edge of the circle, and looked to Roxas. “Be prepared with your light. As strong as you are capable of.” His gaze slid to the ground. “Once we step foot down, the stone will sink, and the labyrinth within will be impenetrably dark. It will continue to lower, from level to level, and I must be able to see our surroundings. If we do not step off the stone in time, we will be lost in the depths.”

He had a hard time even imagining creating light, in this place, but Roxas mumbled, “Yes, sir.” It took a moment of concentration to produce the slight glow.

Riku looked away and briefly entertained the thought of overpowering Saix. Throwing himself from this height may not have been enough to kill him, though the pirates might when they caught him again. All he knew for certain was that he did not want to be forced into some hole, with Roxas to light their way.

“With four... it should not lower too terribly fast,” Xemnas mused to himself, and stepped down.

The ground under his feet lurched barely an inch, disconnecting from the rest of the rock. Saix shoved Riku onto the sinking dais, who could not brace himself and collapsed hard to his knees. Pitiless, Saix's hand remained on his shirt collar. Roxas hastened to stand with his legs apart as he joined them, trying to maintain his balance.

At a rapid crawl, the stone platform began to lower. The screech of rock scraping rock was terrible and grating, and went on until they'd sunk below the thick layer.

The space around them was black, seeming to swallow and darken the night sky above until it all blended into seamless nothing. The mountain was hollow.

Immediately, Roxas focused on illuminating the darkness, but his light barely cut through the pitch. Impassive, Xemnas's sharp eyes sought anything and everything.

“... Brighter.”

He almost had to screw up his eyes as he put in more effort still, emitting a glow like the sickly morning. It may as well have been as dim as torchlight in natural darkness, for all the effect it had, but it served well enough. Still, whatever was on that first level below was out of their grasp, now; there was another gravelly, pitchy groan of the platform's sides against rock.

Riku cringed, the combination of noise and Roxas being too bright to bear prompting him to look around instead. The light was shining onto the level below, and Roxas squinted in the attempt to see past himself. He was practically vibrating with energy, not sure how long he could keep this up.

What were they even looking for...?

It seemed like there were other walls around them made of velvety black, and when the light hit them they recoiled like a living thing. Roxas stiffened, almost took a step backwards. Riku felt a hot wave of nausea as the darkness skittered over itself and away, like an army of spiders retreating into a solid mass.

Xemnas was uninterested. He'd dismissed the level the moment he saw it, and waited testily to descend more.

The next level down was all long hallways, and down every one was something pale and distant. It was rushing at them, and Roxas flinched and flickered.
“Light,” Xemnas reprimanded sharply.

The white mist had already encroached on them, spilling onto the platform. Roxas grit his teeth, shining that much brighter in attempt to cut through it – it was clinging to his skin, creeping under like he'd been submerged in cold water. Riku couldn’t stop shuddering, even Saix didn't seem able to bear it. His growl was just barely audible, hair raising.

Folding his arms, Xemnas waited to pass it. Roxas shut his eyes, but he could feel the mist gradually lift as the dais sank lower.

Riku took in a breath that was wholly unpleasant, the air suddenly too warm and wet for his lungs. It wasn't unlike having coughed up cold water, or breathing in mold; the mist left remnants that didn't clear fast enough. Saix wasn't holding his head down, though, and he lifted it up to apprehensively appraise their new surroundings.

Xemnas was already dismissive, determining that they were not yet where they needed to be. Within the dark were gleaming snatches of color that reflected the light and left Roxas dazzled. They were crystals, or something like it, and the walls they were attached to looked wet.

It really was warmer, here. Roxas felt a little flush with it, and there was a faint hissing coming off the walls.

With a sound of strain, Riku forced himself onto his feet, and was not contested. Xemnas knew he wouldn’t attempt to get away, though that very thought was crossing his mind. If he sprinted off the dais now, lost himself in this place... wherever they were... That would be better. Surely, it would be better.

But he did not try. Pressure ground in on his ears. They were going deeper and deeper, so far under even the raised surface they’d come from that it just couldn't be. They couldn’t have traveled so far below the surface of an island, but they just kept sinking.

Riku felt like that scared little boy, again... There was something wrong with that. A fog, in his head. It was harder to remember what being a young boy was like. Who that child was.

Holding the light as high as he could, Roxas looked anxiously to Xemnas. If he'd just tell them what they were on the lookout for...

But he’d seen it, just then. The light caught and created a purposeful shape. Straight lines, an arched point. A doorway.

“Now.”

Saix yanked Riku off the platform towards the door, spurred to action before Xemnas himself had even swept forward. Roxas hurried with them, the last one over the side. Without their weight, the stone lifted again, rising even faster than it had descended. It left a gaping hole behind, and Roxas staggered farther forward, not sure how far that drop went on.

The light continued to eke from the doorway, as though the sun itself lay beyond it. Roxas knew otherwise, though. The doorway had absorbed his light, he'd caused it somehow... It brightened and faded with his power.

“... This is it,” Xemnas approached it, and glanced back to instruct Saix. “Be sure they keep up.”

“Yes, sir.” He gave Roxas a look that could sear skin.
Xemnas lifted a hand, pressing it to the frame. The glow spread around his fingers, the door itself uncomfortably malleable... but usable. His eyes closed.

“... I can feel it. The Nothing, beyond the door. Our path has not yet formed...”

The words were nonsense, to Roxas. He stared intently, trying to make sense of what Xemnas was doing. As he drew his hand away, the glimmer of a hollow, void red was siphoned through the blank surface by his fingers. Until it dwindled, the door had no solid shape or handle, but once the last redness snuffed itself out he simply pushed it.

It opened to an endless drop, water spilling down platforms like a fountain. They were on spindly supports, long stone stilts that went on forever and surely would teeter if not snap.

Roxas's breath caught in his throat, hesitating and staring at the small waterfalls. Saix got a firmer grasp on Riku's collar, surely sensing the need to bolt from him.

“Take the boy forward first.”

Riku tensed, almost growled, but still refused to speak. That felt like he'd be losing the last thing he had.

Without any fear of walking into the abyss, Saix pulled Riku carelessly forward and over to the nearest rise. Water sloshed around their feet, flowing illogically without end, but the surface wasn't so slick that Riku couldn't keep his footing.

Either way, he didn't care. Dying now might be a mercy... He couldn't recall anything worth hoping for, even though there was something he needed to stay alive for. Surely. There had to be.

Riku just couldn't place what.

Pushed forward by the shoulder, Roxas almost stumbled on the first broad step and felt his stomach plummet. Somehow, he managed to keep the light from dimming. Xemnas passed them all, crossing over the blank abyss from one platform to the other in only a stride.

The route was familiar. His path was marked, laid out by endless waterfalls. The dry platforms would crumble underfoot, and looked as such.

“Remarkable, how clearly I remember,” Xemnas remarked, with Saix close on his heels. Roxas scrambled after them, holding his breath.

He really wasn't a fan of heights... or perceived ones, at least.

“I imagine this place may have the opposite effect on you,” Xemnas went on. “Do remember my instructions, if nothing else.”

Roxas shook his head firmly, not understanding what the Superior could mean, but even as he did he seemed to be grasping harder for thoughts. He felt scattered, sort of distant - it wasn’t unlike being overtired, or over-liquored...

He followed them up to a broad ridge – it was difficult to see, from where they were, but the enormous waterfall flowed from a source, a cavernous wall attached to nothing else. It was still too shallow and slow to knock them off their feet, if they were careful, but so high up that even Xemnas had to leap to reach.

He reached down to drag Riku upwards, who did not fight him. Riku was having a hard time placing
the reason for his resistance – he knew it had something to do with... Sora.

Riku remembered Sora like a heartache, but... There was someone else, or something else. Riku needed to go to them...

If only he could recall why.

Roxas could not even think that far back. His light flickered again as he was dragged up alongside Saix, and momentarily he forgot what the purpose of the light was. He disregarded that, regained control of it, lifted it high.

The water was running down two sluices and pouring over their feet, many paths before them but only one available. The openings were barred by thriving, thick plant life, save for only one. A single route was accessible, the vines withered, dead, and torn sparse.

“Keep it steady,” Xemnas commanded Roxas coldly. “If you lose your light, we may all be lost.”

They went on through the open path, leaving the sound of rushing water behind. Roxas's light should have been too much, in the enclosed space, but it still provided little more than lamplight. As they progressed, the stone walls bore obvious signs of being scorched. The burn marks caught Roxas's attention, had him lingering over them, but he had to think long and hard about why.

He should have been warmer. Something about the marks meant heat, from the outside and in. The air was thick and cold, though, and it was... wrong.

Light caught and illuminated another doorway ahead of them, a glowing engraving snaked into being over the lintel. Attention swayed, Roxas brought his glowing hand up high above his head, trying to brighten them.

The reflection off the door was a sheen, indistinct and harder to make out in the light. It was obvious to Riku that it wasn't solid, now, and the words became clear:

'Nothing can penetrate; Nothing may pass; Nothing lies beyond.'

“... What...?” Forgetting himself, confusion slipped past Riku's lips.

Already familiar with this riddle, a brilliant redness formed something like a blade in Xemnas's hand. Roxas took a hasty step back, murmuring the words aloud.

With ease, Xemnas cut through the dark barrier and destroyed it without even a change in his expression. The dark dissipated, and something even emptier was let behind. “Nothing lies past this,” he ominously warned. “You must all wait here, until I signal you. Shine as brightly as possible,” he commanded Roxas, who was inordinately glad for the instruction.

He felt so clouded... Blank, almost. Roxas shut his eyes and focused until he'd taken on the power of a small sun, and both Saix and Riku shut their burning eyes. Saix detested even imitated sunlight, preferring the silvery glow of the moon, and Riku was too acclimatized to dark to bear it.

Xemnas walked forward into the nothingness, manipulating it around him. It felt stifling, even to a master of it; there was no air, no anything, and all Xemnas could do to survive it was feel his way through it for where 'something' should be. There were places – not places, there were no places, there was nothing at all – but pockets where the nothingness felt forced or deliberate. Xemnas parted it, made something tangible of it.

A surface on which to walk. Air to breathe. The way ahead... Somewhere, there was the door...
With every step, the void pushed back. Tried to encroach upon him like an enemy, incapable of recognizing its ruler. Xemnas warped it around him, and in his wake it crept over, enclosing him in an unending nonexistence.

There.

The void was stretched thin, and Xemnas banished it, forcing the door into being.

The stone path the Superior had let behind was becoming more and more inhabitable, the nothingness trying to spill through and eat away at reality. Roxas was almost gasping for breath when Xemnas appeared abruptly, and he dared to squint through his unbearable brightness.

“Your key, boy. Summon it.”

The light faded until it only filled the area, the keyblade forming in Roxas's hand with a burst. Riku watched, badly jarred.

He'd been repeating Sora's name in his head like it was the only thing he knew, and Riku wasn't so sure that wasn't the case. But, looking at Roxas... He hadn't heard his name spoken aloud, he didn't think, but Sora was still on his mind.

Was he Sora? Was he trying to reach him, then, or get away from him?

“Come forward,” Xemnas manipulated the void again. “And stay close.”

Almost reflexively, Riku began to shift in Saix's grasp, making to follow.

“You stay, boy,” Xemnas ordered, and Saix clutched the back of his neck painfully. “Our destination shall be brought to you.”

One hand clamped down on Roxas's shoulder, and he murmured an affirmative. In an absent manner, he was frustrated – the reason for his apprehension kept slipping away, evading him. Something was wrong, but Roxas just couldn't place it anymore.

Riku could only stare after him, as the two disappeared into null.

It was harder to contain another presence, but Xemnas did not boast power for nothing. The creation of sound was more vague, involved more finesse, but he managed. When he spoke, it was quietly, close to indifferent if not for the excited edge of greed.

He was so close, now.

“Ahead of us, there is a door naught can open but a key like yours, and a place that exists nowhere until it has been connected. This will be trying.”

“I-... There are others?” Roxas glanced quickly down at the keyblade, nonplussed.

His response was clipped. “There were, once.”

Stunned, Roxas tried to make sense of the key once more, fighting to understand what it might do and where it had come from. Was this his use, then? Not his light, but the key?

He'd been concerned about that, once... Hadn't he?

“Here,” Xemnas waved a hand before the blankness of the door, which had no obvious handle, lock... even shape, to Roxas's eyes. More dubious still, he raised the key vaguely in its direction.
“Focus.”

He was on the verge of snapping at Xemnas before he remembered what an alarmingly stupid thing that was to do. Both hands went to the hilt, and he steadied himself. Roxas felt... unpracticed, unprepared, but all his energy was going into finding the seal and breaking it. Xemnas's burning eyes never moved, observing him with sharp intensity.

His impatience was mounting. He was so close now, his goal was only a step away...

Roxas's experience at the castle was at the forefront of his mind as warmth spread up his arms, making them shake. It seized him, forced him into immobilization... and to his shock, there was the heavy grinding sound of a door being wrenched open, even with nothing visibly happening.

Almost violently, Xemnas pulled the void apart to bridge the gap between them and those left behind. Both Saix and Riku were brought back to the light, and the door stood in front of all four. Riku went stiff, the unfathomable darkness having tormented him for the entirety of their absence and making the change all the more terrible. Roxas almost leapt back in astonishment, keyblade scraping along the ground.

Only Saix seemed indifferent, finding Xemnas's face and registering the aura of triumph.

“... What did you do...?” Riku sounded weaker than he liked.

“I don't know,” Roxas answered, quiet and hoarse.

“Your time to speak has passed,” Saix pushed Riku through the door. Otherwise ignored, Xemnas strode on through with a slow smirk.

The new chamber glittered black, not unlike the crystal formations from the level they'd passed. The floor was comprised of uneven platforms all crushed together, one smooth crystal dais in the apparent center of the room. It was a few feet high, steps in infrequent clusters around it like an afterthought. There were four protrusions, arcs, coming up along the sides of the platform in a worrisome way.

“Ugh-...” Riku almost choked on his spite and scowled, apprehension clenching his throat. The surface under his feet was solid, but still somehow not truly there. He thought that if he knelt, tried to run his fingers over it and identify the substance, he wouldn't be able to.

“Saix. You know what must be done.”

“Sir,” he nodded, and grabbed the manacles' chain.

“Ngh-!” Riku was pulled backwards towards the dais, and he broke into struggles, yanked hard to no avail. Sora fueled his fight, just because he knew that name meant something – he didn't know what, he didn't care, he couldn't let this happen. Whatever this was. Nothing mattered, Sora mattered, so he had to – he had to...

The urge to run nearly overpowered Roxas, watching helplessly. If he hadn't known he'd only be lost, he would have given in. Still, with the fighting – he was starting to panic, mind a swirling mess of confusion. He couldn't remember which of them were enemies. Which of them were allies. Who he should help, because surely he needed to.

But he couldn't tell what was going on...

Xemnas walked around the dais to take his place, a gouged hollow space between two sets of steps. He stood there and closed his eyes, already beginning to take on a nigh-imperceptible glow. The
Nothing, his power, thrummed through his being. It was all at the forefront, and Xemnas only had to lose himself within it, now.

Riku was forced back off his feet, back crashing painfully against the raised platform. He hissed, kicked, thrashed for all he was worth. Saix only just refrained from tearing into him with claws, wrestling him down and withdrawing rope from his pack. It was pulled across his chest, tying him down and securing the ends through the crystal arcs.

All his scrambling to slip the ropes were to no avail. Riku, winded, snarled, “This is how you're going to kill me? Pathetic -”

“We have not traveled this far to end your life, boy,” Saix spat, tightening the ropes as he considered gagging him.

“Then what?!”

Disturbingly, Saix sounded almost reverent. “You will serve a higher purpose than mere death.”

That triggered... something in Roxas's mind. He knew this. He'd been told what was about to happen, something positively grotesque. He started to back away.

“Roxas. Come forward.”

“Roxas-?” For a moment, Riku was struck still. 'Roxas' wasn't right; he'd thought Sora was near, and that name hit the wrong chord. He didn't understand... He didn't understand any of this.

“Forward,” Saix growled, finishing with the rope. “Now.”

Roxas did as he was told, helplessly confused. Only direction gave him any sense of focus.

“Stand before your Captain.”

The memories blurred. Roxas guessed at his position, taking his place in front of Xemnas. He was difficult to look at, a hazy red nullity trying to blind him. The danger caught up to Riku again, and though struggling was a pointless endeavor he still tried. Threw himself either way, did all he could as long as it meant he wasn't just lying there in acceptance.

Saix left him to his endeavor, going around to grab Roxas's shoulder. “Your blade. Drive it through his chest.”

“What?” The keyblade was still drawn, almost shaking in his hand.

“Do not question your orders,” Saix was unwavering, staring him into compliance. He was too lost to argue, and the dig of his claws shot fear through him like a drug.

He turned the keyblade in both hands, point down, and thrust it forward.

The blade pierced Xemnas through with stunning ease and shockingly little reaction. It didn't feel like running through a person; it was like running through a veil, and a brightness separate from the red glow gleamed at the end of the key.

Riku pulled that much harder, eyes wide. “What the hell is going on-...”

That vibration was wracking Roxas's insides, the keyblade almost too hot to keep holding. It took an incredible amount of strength to move, but Roxas shakily managed, pulling the blade back out. The ghostly, shining haze remained speared through the end. Xemnas's body was left a motionless,
vacant thing, locked in place and standing without strength.

Saix took over directing him. He pried Roxas away from Xemnas, and turned him instead towards Riku, grip like iron.

Riku didn't understand, and he didn't care to anymore. This couldn't happen, this was going to destroy him, and he couldn't let it. There was something more he had to do, something he had to escape for -

Directing him up the steps, Saix finally let go to walk around the dais and force Riku's shoulders flat against the surface. He held him down, and looked up at Roxas with intensity.

“Drive it down.”

Roxas was standing over Riku, his feet flanking him. He stared down, his eyes almost obscured with the brightness of their blue glow.

His hands clenched tighter around the hilt, practically fused to it.

Riku went still, rigid. “Sora -”

Roxas only faltered for an instant. Even the twinge of recognition couldn't shake the vibration overcoming him. There was only one way to put an end to it.

He plunged the keyblade down, over Riku's chest.

It hit something impregnable, and could not be forced through. Before Roxas could even process surprise, he was thrown back onto the floor, the burst sending Saix skidding with a snarl.

Riku shook, eyes wide.

Had he... had he done that? He couldn't fathom how, but... Had he?

Saix regathered composure, stalking over to Roxas to haul him up. With no explanation as to why Xemnas's ritual hadn't worked, his first concern was his Captain's life force, still freed of his body, bound inside the keyblade.

Dizzy with the force he'd been thrown by, Roxas's head rushed as he was suddenly placed on to his feet. “Agh...”

“What happened?” Saix hissed, checking that the keyblade hadn't sustained damage.

“I-I don't know!”

Taking advantage of the distraction, Riku's wrists twisted and pulled, attempting to wrestle them free. If he just... kept his wits about him...

With a growl, Saix steered Roxas back towards Xemnas. “You can explain to the Captain.”

Roxas shook, expecting to be beaten within an inch of his life for his failure. He'd been telling the truth; he couldn't fathom why it had happened, but he didn't think that explanation would be worth anything. He didn't know what he'd done in the first place. Saix raised the keyblade for him, pressing the end to Xemnas's chest.

The glow sank back into him, swallowed up by the renewed flicker of red, and life was regained. Roxas felt more sickened by watching the body come back to life than he was seeing it become a
hollow vessel. Xemnas drew himself up, and processed what was before him with narrowing eyes. He was looking at Riku, clearly not expecting to be able to, and he gazed down at his hands as he flexed them.

“What went wrong?” He was accusing, sharp.

Saix dropped to one knee, not to rise until the order was given. “It appears the boy's body is resisting somehow, Captain.”

Swiftly, Xemnas stepped forward and gripped Riku's throat, eyes mere slits of radiant gold. “How?”

Riku froze, trying not to choke. His wrists had almost come free, a little slick with the blood scraped from his veins.

“You are unremarkable,” Xemnas pronounced each word furiously. “Your only value comes from your father, and his before him...”

The accusation was familiar, even if the idea of his father was not. Riku couldn't place the man, but tried hard to bring an image to mind, and his head tilted back unconsciously. To crane away, and perhaps in subconscious submission.

The keyblade faded in Roxas's hand. He staggered back into one of the walls, weakened.

He wanted... something. Someone? He needed an explanation... He needed comfort... He needed...

“... No...” Xemnas almost quaked, but his grip slowly released and his fingers stretched out, getting used to the feel of them again. “It was not you.”

He spoke to Saix, but his gaze did not waver from the blossoming bruise on Riku's neck. “Bring him to me.”

Saix stood immediately, wrapping a crushing hand around Roxas's arm and wrenching him forward.

“I don't understand what went wrong-...” Roxas flinched, not trying to resist. “I-I did everything Saix told me!”

Xemnas reached for him by the hair, wrestling him to his knees with the grip. “Then what went wrong.”

He groaned, pained. “I couldn't push it through. It... It just forced me away.”

There was a moment in which Xemnas seemed to evaluate this, but he determined it to be truth. With a scowl, he shoved Roxas to the floor.

“Something is not right. We should have been informed.”

“Perhaps the witch has been withholding more to protect her friend,” Saix crossed his arms. It seemed a likely scenario, to his Superior's ears, and he showed as much with a terse nod.

“We will... address this, with Namine.”

Riku stopped with one wrist almost free, his heart pounding. He was sure that meant something to him, and Roxas had much the same feeling.

“We leave,” Xemnas commanded curtly. “Now.”
Shakily, Roxas got to his feet. Saix merely cut through the ropes binding Riku and dragged him upright, and inexplicably, Riku was almost grateful just to have the use of his legs. Somehow, Saix was even harsher in dragging him along now, following almost on Xemnas's heels.

“The key.” Impatient, Xemnas was all the more aggressive in his orders. “Connect us with the outside.”

With a quiet sound of strain, Roxas summoned the keyblade and lifted it again. He didn't even try to question whether or not he was capable of obeying. Reality was so malleable in this place that Xemnas only gave the door a piercing look, willing the shape beyond as the lock was found and opened.

It swung outwards, leading them to a spatter of burnt trees. The pale hull and sails were visible beyond them, still ashore on the narrow strip of wan beach, as was...

Green. Snatches of green, so flush with life that it practically shone amongst all the desolation.

Xemnas's pace quickened.

What they reached was not yet the aftermath. Several battles had already been fought and won, but not all.

The nearest trees had been reduced to ash. Lightning had split them through, left the air ringing with static. The wind had uprooted much, practically rearranged the shore. The clouds, once misty and white, were still thick, gray, and heavy with the elements. Xaldin was not bested, yet, but there was more charge than wind around the ship, which could not have made it clearer who was on the cusp of victory.

Xigbar had had to be taken out, first; he was the acting Captain, with Xemnas's absence. Unconscious, he was strung up in the rope rigging, suspended in a parody of his most commonly assumed posture. From afar, someone may not have realized anything was wrong with him. Demyx, long since surrendered, could not often tear his eyes away... Not unless he was looking to Zexion, eyes wide over the state of him as well.

His hands had not been bound together so much as welded. Zexion glowered fiercely with a cloth gag between his teeth, iron twisted and melted into tight clasps around both wrists. They'd created quite a burn when they were wrangled on, and would hurt just as much coming off, if anyone thought it was worth the trouble.

Demyx feared for those hands. They were so slender and skilled. So pretty. He didn't want anything more to happen to them. Really, all he wanted at all was for this to be over, for what did it really matter who commanded the ship?

Vexen seemed to disagree, and part of his obvious indignation had to have been spurred on by the treatment of his colleagues. Still, attempting to take on Axel...

Only a fool tried to dampen fire with ice.

Lexaeus was in the most terrible state of them all. Marluxia had wrung life from the dead Oblivion, pulling plant life from rotten earth... and once he'd done that, Lexaeus was almost simple. The stone
armor had been split by bursting seeds, vines sprouting rapidly from his very skin and tethering the remaining chunks of stone to his skin. He was scraped, bruised, bloodied by welts and friction burns.

The only other crewman they might have had to deal with was Luxord... and he had deigned surrender the more desirable option. He drank, he ignored.

Above everything, standing tall on the quarter deck, Marluxia oversaw the fall of the last two trying to resist his rule with a sadistic air of victory. Namine, in chains, beside him; Axel and Larxene, dominating as he'd counted on them to do; and there they were. The shore party, coming back with metaphorical tails between their legs, to a ship no longer under Xemnas's control.

Marluxia imagined he must feel weakened. Xemnas must be shaken by shadows of rage, of failure. For the first time, Xemnas must know that his power had slipped.

“Our Superior no more,” Marluxia greeted, smirk manic and cruel, as Xemnas boarded with brilliantly glowing eyes.

“I hope this journey has taught you that knowledge is the only real power, 'Captain'... which is why I'll be taking that title from now on.”
We are SO HAPPY to be putting out this chapter at long last! And after a hiatus, no less!

For those who don't follow our tumblr, we've laid out our remaining schedule in this post here! If you don't feel like clicking it, the gist is this: 'The Ship That Never Was' is set to wrap up on February 29, 2016. And - no spoilers - y'all are in for a ride. As of now.

Also, there are notes at the end of this chapter. THEY ARE A SPOILER. DON'T JUMP TO THEM.

Thanks to everyone for their patience, and we hope you're ready for things to get real.

Small and silent, Namine stood at Marluxia's side, looked upon by both Roxas and Riku with tremendous alarm. Both of them experienced a jolt of recognition, and horror for having forgotten her – Oblivion was still muddling their thoughts, muddling their memories. As Roxas's eyes flickered rapidly from Marluxia, to Namine, to Axel and then to Xemnas, he found some certainty in the situation. He hadn't known the mutiny was coming. Not today.

Riku, stunned and saddened, was starting to race through his thoughts as though he could pull off a rescue amongst the chaos. He was charting the ship more keenly (and less capably) than he ever had, formulating an attack strategy. Slip his cuffs with one hand, use them as a woefully close-range mace to bludgeon his captors away, hoist himself to the quarter deck...

“Captain - !”

Fire met Vexen's back as he turned, barked towards Xemnas as though the fight would end if he called his Superior's attention to it. He was struck to the deck and stepped on, too badly burned and weakened to maintain consciousness for much longer. Axel, showing no other signs of exertion than a thin sheen of sweat, swaggered over Vexen on his way to the quarter deck.

It was time for the theatrics and showboating, no doubt, and Xemnas was already delivering. His steps were slow and deliberate, facing Marluxia rather than paying either Larxene or Axel the slightest heed. He gave even less mind to those of this crew currently captured or otherwise useless. Not even Roxas or Riku were given a glance, nor was an order spoken to keep them restrained while he dealt with the situation at hand; Saix could be trusted to do so unprompted.

“I lack the patience for your antics, Marluxia.” Despite the earlier rise in his temper, Xemnas sounded surprisingly unaffected. “I will give you the opportunity to stand down before you try it further.”

Marluxia held himself with the condescending air of a man who anticipated his enemy's every move. “I see you return from your clandestine expedition with nothing to show for it. How... expected.”
“I imagine you're alluding to something,” Xemnas intoned. “If you're wise, you'll do as your Captain orders before I find it any less amusing.”

“You no longer have the authority to give orders to me,” Marluxia scoffed, “or weren't you listening?”

“You will answer,” Saix snarled, narrow eyes darting from Marluxia to Axel. Glowing green met the gaze, Axel slipping behind Marluxia with confident ease and a relaxed sort of stance. Done with compromising Xaldin, Larxene's gleaming little knives fixed their aim at the Captain, and she looked to be longing for an excuse to use them.

“You think you're in a position to extort me?” Xemnas demanded coldly. Smug, Marluxia brushed his hair back over his shoulder.

“I expect you're wanting to know why your ritual failed.”

“As much as I would like to know what you thought you'd accomplish by withholding that information, if you do have it,” he replied sharply.

Axel spoke up, however unwisely, raising an eyebrow. “That really should be obvious. He's trying to give you the option to surrender to him.”

“It's quite simple, actually,” Marluxia drawled. “In return for your compliance in handing command of this ship over to me, I will tell you all that you so foolishly failed to see. If you resist, well... I suppose I'll have Axel and Larxene deal with you.”

“You fellow mutineers,” Xemnas coldly observed. Larxene covered her mouth daintily as she laughed.

Quietly intrigued to see how much Marluxia planned to implicate himself, Axel did not yet speak.

“Of course. I really can't be bothered to dispose of you, myself.” Idly, he stroked Namine's hair, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

A sound unlike any they'd heard the young Captain make spilled out of his mouth, rage flashing like a lightning strike, and Riku lunged forward unthinkingly. Saix was ready for him, cutting him down in an instant with a heavy arm against Riku's chest. Too infuriated to hold back, he sent Riku sprawling to the deck hard.

Namine bit into her cheek at the sound of a pained cringe, punishing herself.

Roxas's nails dug painfully into his palms. He had to steel himself to avoid making the same mistake as Riku. He concentrated on counting down the seconds Axel had left to do something before he summoned his keyblade, staring up at him. Axel had yet to notice, still watching Saix as he rounded back towards him, the pair staring each other down.

“You've managed to sink lower even than I expected,” Saix accused him.

Marluxia laughed humorlessly. “He is something to behold, isn't he?”

“You need to crawl through the dirt before you dig anything up... And Marluxia had an abundance of little secrets. But he's right in thinking this is the biggest,” Axel spoke uncomfortably casually, a little bit of a sneer playing on his lips. Heat began to smolder on his skin, preemptively prepared to burn anything that might snake close.
A hand. Vines.

“The Admiral's secret. That Riku isn't his true son.”

Riku froze first. His lips fell apart – that wasn't true. He was going to protest, Axel wasn't speaking sense.

Rounding on him, Marluxia contained his surprise until it was cold fury. He attempted to sound exasperated. The sigh he spoke in held too much of a growl, betraying his panic. He’d miscalculated.

“You've chosen poorly, Axel,” he hissed, and jerked his head towards Larxene.

That was all the confirmation Xemnas needed. He hauled Riku up off the deck, and Larxene leaped upwards, lips parted in outrage and all attention diverted to Axel.

“Traitor!”

His chakram had been hurled to meet her, but not fast enough to avoid an attack. A crack of lightning came down, igniting Axel's skin on impact. The fire burst from him, catching on anything near enough to burn, and Namine threw herself to the deck.

She felt the sear up her back, but the fire retreated before it could catch. Roxas sprang into action, racing past the flurry of rekindled fray.

Saix advanced in a flash, his claws extended by the time they'd locked around Larxene's throat. He threw her down to the deck, pinning her, and in the process freeing Axel to take on Marluxia. In desperation, Marluxia had turned all attention to killing Xemnas, life bursting from the dead trees from the shore and shooting towards him in an instant.

Xemnas's eyes were boring into Riku. The red blade was pushed from his palm, and for a moment, Riku thought it was about to be turned on him. Carelessly, Xemnas cut down the incoming vines and turned his head sharply towards the quarter deck. Axel was burning, smoke coming off him in waves as he sprang towards Marluxia and pulled him tightly to his chest.

His arms wrestled free to summon an enormous scythe, but Marluxia knew he was too close to use it. “A traitor even among traitors,” he snarled. “You disgust me.”

“I'm not staying on board a sinking ship, Marluxia,” he purred, burning holes through his clothing and melting the fibers to his skin.

Roxas had bolted up onto the quarter deck. He skidded and fell to his knees next to Namine, quickly inspecting her blackened dress. “Are you alright?”

There was a shriek – Saix had forced Larxene's wrists, breaking her grip on her knives – and she was sparking viciously, spitting at him, “Bad dog -”

Namine winced. “... I'm alright... Riku-...”

Riku was still in Xemnas's grasp, even as the Captain destroyed the whip-like vines assailing him. “He'll be-... fine. Let's go.”

It was a terrible lie, but he only had one rescue in him, and his loyalty had already been firmly decided. Roxas's arm wrapped around her, and started to pull her up.

“Roxas, no -...” she shook her head fearfully. “They'll kill him.”
Despite his determination, there was just as much fear in Roxas's eyes. “We don't have another chance,” he pleaded, in a voice he remembered too well. The voice that had begged Sora to flee.

Marluxia managed to wrestle himself free and shoved Axel back, swinging his scythe upwards in time to block another attack. Burning hotter, Axel sprang back and sent his chakram forcibly flying into Marluxia. He just managed to avoid letting the steel and flames tear fatally into him. It sent him back hard, though, nearly throwing him overboard, and he hit the railing with enough force to splinter it. Below them, Saix's claws dug into Larxene's throat until blood pooled under them.

“You've lost already,” he nearly whispered, sorely tempted to destroy her neck until his hands were decorated by ribbons of her flesh. “It would be only too easy...”

“Who's lost?” Larxene snarled, and discharged all the electricity she had.

It was a mistake. Saix went rigid, grip locking up rather than letting go, and Larxene unsuccessfully tried to wrench herself free from the pain.

Fire followed Axel's chakram, pelting it at Marluxia in an endless stream. He leapt to take Marluxia down, making him throw himself out of the way. A torrent of vines wrapped around Axel, but Marluxia lost control of some of those binding the others.

The fight couldn't last much longer.

The cover of chaos Roxas was depending on would run dry if they didn’t leave now. He tried again to pull Namine to her feet and out of harm’s way.

“Go... Just go while you can,” Namine implored. “My chains —”

She wouldn't be able to run. There was no saving her, and she couldn't leave Riku, regardless. Riku was...

He wasn't fighting, much. His struggles were listless, staring at Xemnas and only seeing Ansem. It was all Ansem. He'd consumed his thoughts, consumed his will, and Riku couldn't make sense of it.

Riku refused to believe he could be anything but his father. If it wasn't true...

If it wasn't true, his entire life had been bound by a lie. What had it all meant? The justifications, family, what did all of it mean if Ansem had lied?

“... I can open them,” Roxas, rather abruptly, announced. Suddenly, he was completely assured that he could. “I'm not leaving without you.”

He clambered to his feet, dazzling light becoming solid in his hand. He pointed the keyblade at the lock. “Take your hands away...”

The feeling traveled up Roxas's arm almost instantly, this time, and he almost felt like he could direct it. He breathed slow, and deep, and focused.

There was a click as the locks fell open.

Patience lost and certain Riku was now useless, Xemnas simply dragged him as he marched forward. Sensing his approach, Saix's limited range of motion allowed him to throw them over, putting Larxene in his path.

The glowing red blade cut through her clean. It ripped a line through her chest and jut from her
throat, not giving her even enough time to choke. Currents ran up the sizzling wound and dissipated, all signs of life evaporating in an instant.

Getting to his feet, Saix didn't so much as blink at the dissolving gore on the deck. Larxene's body was reducing to electricity, spidery burns blackening the wood and still sparking. Riku only clutched at Xemnas's arm until he was dropped at Saix's feet, spitting on the deck in lieu of coughing as static prickled at him.

He was still reeling. He hardly felt the electricity with the way his skin was crawling.

Oblivious, Axel and Marluxia were still locked in their struggle, which was becoming more and more one-sided. None of the vines had yet to damage Axel, only one making it close enough to slice through his cheek before it shriveled to ash.

“This has gotten a little pathetic... Don't you think?”

He advanced on Marluxia with a malicious sort of grin, not giving him a chance to regroup, and shoved him over the splintered railing to the deck below.

There was a sickening crack, but Marluxia was not finished. He was almost spitting in fury as he fought his way up onto his knees, but went very still when a void red blade positioned itself terrifyingly near to his throat.

Xemnas advanced, walking around to stare into Marluxia's face with his weapon still under his chin. “Keep still, and you may yet keep your life.”

He did no such thing. Marluxia wiped blood from his face, scythe still gripped in his hand even balanced on one knee.

“Alive and under your heel,” Marluxia glared. “I'd sooner die.”

“Very well.”

It went cleanly through his neck. Xemnas struck his head from his shoulders effortlessly, and the body had hardly made contact with the deck before it began to rapidly rot, becoming an indistinct organic mass of changing color. With two dead, the rest of the crew – those still conscious, and able to move – crawled back into sluggish motion. Those bound by vines found themselves released as all life drained back out of the reanimated plants. Demyx flocked to Zexion to see what state he was in while Luxord inspected the vague shape of Larxene's slim frame now burned into the deck. He drank deeply from his flask, expression carefully blank.

Axel stepped forward, looking over the side, giving no attention to the pair staggering upright beside him. Or so it seemed, until he quietly spoke.

“There's nowhere to go. Don't do anything reckless now.”

Roxas had helped Namine to her feet, almost managing a smile when he did so, but went stiff as he looked towards Axel. It was the first acknowledgment of each other since he'd climbed up to the quarter deck, and he'd almost hoped he hadn't been noticed.

“I cut her loose. It'll be worse if we stay now.”

Axel simply watched Marluxia – what was left of him. “‘Worse' might be relative,” he murmured, as Namine trembled with one hand over her mouth. “Don't make it harder for me to talk you out of this.”
Roxas's eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You can't stop me from leaving.”

If it had all been talk, all to keep him complacent only to be stopped when a real opportunity to run came...

In disgust, Saix had looked away from the rot, and his eyes came to rest on the quarter deck. Axel tracked his gaze as it went from him, to Roxas and Namine.

He had to stop him from leaving. Axel was determinedly trying to slot new puzzle pieces into a picture he’d nearly completed, keeping up with the changes as best he could, but he was running out of time to create something believable.

Axel turned towards him, chakram raised and eyes narrowed in exasperation. “Roxas,” he urged, barely audible. “Whose side am I on?”

Matching Axel’s volume, he retorted, “I'm still waiting to see.”

A single pink rose sprouted from the organic mess on the deck, growing to a full bloom with unnatural speed. Then, just as rapidly, the petals fell, scattered to the wind, and the rest withered to a blackened stem.

Contemptuous, Xemnas looked down at the decay with an imperious mutter of, “You were a waste in life, and in death.”

Then he turned, and commanded, “Saix. Bring me the girl.”

With a nod, Saix advanced up to the quarter deck, and Roxas instinctively stepped in front of Namine. Time had run out - time to save her from imprisonment, perhaps death if she was counted a conspirator. What was Axel thinking?

Axel took a few swaying steps back and folded his arms, apparently detached, even as some feeling churned in his chest. He wished he remembered its name. It was unpleasant. He didn't think it was something he wanted to feel very often... It was distracting.

“You are very unwise to stand in my way, boy,” Saix growled, his claws still extended and hair still raised. Namine shrunk, trying to back away and more pale than even usual. Her legs were barely holding her up.

“She's no traitor,” Roxas defended her stiffly.

“She is Marluxia's puppet, and none of your concern.”

He didn't have time to protect himself. Saix balled up a fist in Roxas's shirt and threw him aside, making him skid across the deck.

“Roxas -!”

The cry had come from Namine. Axel didn't lift a finger to defend either of them; it was Xemnas he needed to appeal to. Saix's grip on her shoulder was like iron, almost hard enough to hurt, and she held fast despite her inclination to run to Roxas. Groaning, he was pulling himself to one elbow, looking from Axel to Namine.

“Will we be doing this out here, or will the Captain be taking the entire procession to his quarters?”
Axel inquired in an undertone.

“The Captain wants the girl.” Saix’s expression belied nothing. “Your fate, I imagine, will be decided before the entire crew. That should suit you.”

“You're still invested in me. I'm flattered.”

Roxas stood frozen, watching them descend on their way back to Xemnas, and he couldn't help but wonder if he was about to see them both die.

Xemnas had ordered Luxord and Demyx to see to the fallen crew, the only two to come out of things in any fit state. Demyx was, of course, already at Zexion's beck and call, pulling crumbling vines from him and hanging on his every instruction. For the most part, Zexion seemed unaffected, but the occasional shudder wracked his whole body.

“Marluxia's pet,” Xemnas bit out as Namine was steered towards him, Saix holding her still despite her complacency. “How unfortunate he had you so well-collared that you never let on the truth during our rare consults.”

“You put her in his charge to be tortured,” Axel broke in breezily. “If she didn't think she'd die, do you really think she'd do everything Marluxia told her?”

She made a sincere attempt to shrink, and Xemnas threw him a piercing look. All the same, Axel continued as though he wasn't in mortal danger.

“He would've orchestrated the truth to look like a lie, out of her. She was going to be disposed of no matter what, so why not play the part and prolong her existence? That's why I stepped in.”

“Stepped in?” Xemnas echoed cuttingly.

“Marluxia had tools, not allies. Saix and I suspected him ages ago... And I've been worming secrets out of him ever since.”

Saix glanced at Axel sidelong but did not interrupt, wanting to watch the story he was spinning unfold... and see how much of it might be the truth.

“Secrets.” Once again, Xemnas repeated him, now in a detached manner that was all the more deadly. “That you chose to divulge after your part in a mutiny?”

“The truth about the young Captain came out once you'd left. Marluxia thought there would be no better time to strike... And he wasn't wrong.” Still with the utmost confidence, Axel shrugged. “I had a choice, Captain. I could show my loyalty and have him turn on me, at a risk... Follow you, with no clue where to go... Or wait for you to return and kill Marluxia and Larxene.”

One second passed, then another, and Axel wondered if he was transparent. Xemnas seemed to be looking right through him, and all his prior musings and planning were falling to the wayside. His lies were spread out in front of Axel like a map he was traversing, and he thought it might come off better that way. If Xemnas thought he'd pick out something calculated or too well-laid, in Axel's mind, he would not find it.

Axel just had to keep this up, but lying was as easy as fire. All it took was one ember to get it going.

“... You say there were other secrets.”

“Only a few of significance. As it turns out, Marluxia knew a lot more about your first step than I
figured out at the time. About the Captain, and about Roxas.”

Slowly, ensuring that once again no one was paying him any mind, Roxas edged towards Riku, eyes intensely narrow. Namine was quiet, certain what was being said couldn't be true, and Riku only listened without truly hearing. He was tense, locked into his own body, apparently determined to torture himself because he still could think of nothing but Ansem's face, his hands, an echo of his voice calling him 'boy' in such a belittling way...

“I know that you need the Admiral's bloodline. I don't know why, but I know that much,” Axel clarified, lies atop more lies. “Our child Captain was abducted, not born from him – isn't that right?”

Slowly, Namine nodded, a hollow throb in her chest. “I drew it... I didn't know at the time Marluxia was keeping it from you, I swear -”

“Quiet, girl,” Xemnas coldly stopped her, and addressed Axel. “And Roxas?”

“Marluxia wanted the twin disposed of, before you could ever know. For this to work, you need Sora.”

The image of Ansem shattered, panic pierced by the sound of his lover's name. “No -”

Roxas had only just knelt by Riku when Axel's words hit him like a broadsword. He looked around sharply, demanding under his breath, “What are you doing...?”

“I got pretty close to Roxas,” Axel leered, like he was boasting. “Learned a lot about him. I didn't realize the significance of real twins for such a while...”

“The point, Axel.”

“He told me about their childhood. Cute story, about feeling like he was different, Sora comforting him and insisting they were the same...” Axel waved a hand. “Kids. Roxas thought the only way to make that true was to unlock a piece of his power, and hid it in Sora. He has the other half.”

It was fortunate no one seemed interested in actually looking Roxas's way. He was staring at Axel in disbelief, trying – to no avail – to remember ever telling him anything remotely resembling his ridiculous story.

He was making it up. ... He was going somewhere with this.

His soft sound of understanding could have passed for anger, if one wasn't paying too close attention, and mercifully no one was. If they did, he would have to appear convincingly betrayed.

Saix's eyes were narrow. “Are you going to tell us next that this was your plan for him from the beginning?”

“I tried to tell you that,” Axel's palms spread in front of him with a shrug. “But it got difficult to tell whose allegiance was where, once we stopped meeting up in dark places... Which was a shame,” he smirked, too suggestively. Xemnas's eyes narrowed imperceptibly, but still, he spoke devoid of tone.

“You mean to tell me that you were plotting with Saix... against Marluxia.”

“I did everything I had to, to get information. Arranged distractions for Roxas to sneak in and meet Namine, so she could tell him more about Sora... Made Marluxia think I was his co-conspirator... Seduced everything Roxas knew out of him... And figured out exactly what you need, Captain. The Admiral, and two halves of a whole.”
Saix hung on every word, and said nothing to either confirm or deny it; he could spot shades of dishonesty, but Saix's own disloyalty was being upended with it. If Axel was to be believed, their private meetings would be cast in a new light in the Captain's eyes.

Likewise, Roxas listened to the whole spiel intently with white knuckles, something real developing through the layers of lies. The bottom line was that he was sending Xemnas after Sora.

He rose to his feet, weapon drawn. The betrayal was not faked, now.

“... Hm,” Xemnas looked to Saix. “The girl is your jurisdiction, henceforth. Make sure there are no more oversights.”

A whipping was not to be administered, then. That was as close to approval as Axel could ever expect, and with the vaguest glimmer of triumph, his gaze slid to Roxas to find him glaring.

“Of course, Captain.” Saix's grip became crushing, obviously hurting her, and he aggressively began directing Namine below deck. Roxas's glower broke, starting forward.

“No -!”

He was struck down before he could get far, Xemnas's violence not quelled even by killing, and the decision to spare Axel already made. “Unless you want to spend the rest of your short existence in the brig, you will respect command.”

Roxas's vision swam, ears ringing after being knocked flat a second time. He didn’t think he could get up again so quickly this time.

“As for you...” Xemnas took a single step over to Riku with the intention of hauling him up. He was starting to stand on his own, though, clarity having returned even if strength had not.

“... Not Sora,” he uttered, and the presence that demanded respect from a crew eeked into his voice. “If you touch him -”

“You are of no further use to me, boy.”

The blade appeared in Xemnas's hand again, and Axel had less than a second to think of something to say.

“If I may, Captain... He might have a little value.”

Riku was glaring Xemnas down, drawn to his full – not unimpressive – height. Xemnas did not look away from him, but there was a distaste clearly being directed at Axel instead of Riku.

“If you dare say...”

“I wouldn't make any suggestion Xigbar would.” He knew better than to think that would sway Xemnas even remotely; he had Saix for tending to his base greed. “You want the Admiral unharmed, am I right? Why not exchange his son?”

Xemnas speculated on the idea briefly. It wasn't clear if he decided Axel's proposition had merit, but if nothing else, he seemed to come to the conclusion that he didn't have to kill Riku now. He turned on Roxas.

“Get up. I'm giving you a chance to know your place.”

Roxas stared up at him for less than a second before struggling to his feet, swaying slightly.
“Tether the prisoner and take him to the brig.”

“I could take him, Captain. I'm in better shape...”

“I commanded Roxas to do it,” Xemnas raised on eyebrow at Axel. “You will clean up your mess, and then wait in your quarters for Saix to fetch you.”

He'd tested his luck more than enough, today. “Yes, Cap'n.”

Roxas grunted with him in near-unison, and retrieved a length of rope from among the recovering captives. Their standoff broken, Riku shut his eyes.

His chest was still tight, panic impeding his heartbeat. It felt off, somehow. Before now, Riku had not been completely aware how powerfully words could affect someone, so far as to make him physically sick... but if he had to describe what was happening to him, he would have said he was dying. It felt like he was dying. Arrhythmia choking him, skin crawling and dirty in every conceivable way and he was small, powerless...

He was starting to think he always had been. Ansem was right, had been right all along. He was only a boy.

And Sora, who he loved with everything he had, was in peril once again. Riku could think of only one way to come to his defense, and cared not a lick for his dignity anymore.

“... Captain.” Riku felt small, but his voice was not. It was still firm, still powerful. “Whatever you need Sora for, you can use me. Whatever it is. I'll do anything.”

Xemnas faced him again. “Even if a substitute could be used, your begging does not endear you to the task.”

He swept away, and Riku's stomach twisted.

He wished this was the first time he'd ever felt this weak.

Riku said nothing as his arms were tugged behind his back. Roxas bound them as efficiently as his faint wooziness allowed, not consoling in the least; he wasn't particularly on his side, still, and the small amount of pity he had for him existed for Sora's sake. He spared him the indignity of binding anything but his wrists.

“You're his brother,” Riku murmured, hate displaced upon him as he was pushed forward. “Do something. Don't let them take Sora.”

“You saw what happened,” he hissed back. “If you think I have any better chance of convincing them than you do, then you know nothing about these pirates.”

Almost instinctively, Riku pulled at his wrists. “Xemnas couldn't do anything without you. Save Sora, do whatever you have to – will you, or won't you?!”

“I'll do whatever it takes, but talking the Captain out of it won't be it.” Tugging him back, Roxas spoke a little clearer once they were below deck. “I told Axel to save you if he could. That's what he chose to do.”

He almost looked around. “What -?”

“In case you hadn't noticed, you'd be dead if he hadn't stepped in.”
“I thought -...” Riku stopped, swallowed. “... I don't know what I thought.”

Roxas steered him further down. “Maybe he has a plan from here, but I don't know. No matter what, Sora and Namine are my priority.”

“... They’re all that matter now,” Riku mumbled, and Roxas had nothing to say to that.

Nothing comforting.

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When rational argument, and appealing to any good nature she had thought Ansem had failed her, Kairi had two options left in her power to try and free Sora.

The first was to make the lives of everyone on board – herself included – miserable. It wasn’t much strain to summon her ‘haughty princess’ disposition when she needed it, especially with her temper already running high. Disbelief and desperation were sapping her patience like nothing she’d dealt with before.

So, if it was to be a contest of who could be more bullheaded and unreasonable, Ansem had no idea the kind of opponent he was in for.

For a day or so after her secret visit to Sora’s cell, Kairi made sure she was an absolute nightmare. Every time a meal tray was brought to her door or collected – both in the same, untouched state – she made herself quite clear that she would eat with Sora at her side, or not at all. She wandered the ship at any time of night or day she pleased except, pointedly, when an escort was provided. Any crewman sent to bring her a message was forced to speak to her closed door, and her blunt refusal to listen unless Ansem was summoned to deliver the message personally.

Kairi expected no sympathy for her behavior, nor any mercy. Knowing Ansem as she did now, he wasn’t the sort of man who could be compelled to go back on his decisions simply because a girl was starving herself. Perhaps in enough time the more soft-hearted or nationalistic of his crew would cry out against the cruelty done to their princess, but if anything would move him it would be the accusation of treason, not pity.

She also knew that he fully expected her to break first. Throwing tantrums and rejecting comfort were only short-term weapons of those who had rarely been uncomfortable in their lives. That may have been true for Kairi once, maybe it would be still if she were facing anyone but Ansem, if anything less was at stake.

Just over one day into her hunger strike, Kairi felt a fierce confidence that she could have, and would have outlasted Ansem… except for one thing.

This wasn’t helping.

In a battle of wills, she could match the Admiral, and beat him, at that, but that was all she would win. She could prove herself more stubborn in the end, but it wasn’t going to free Sora. Issuing Ansem a blatant challenge may have actually made things worse, now that digging in their heels and refusing to be the one to budge first was a point of pride.

Anyway, she didn’t like being this sort of person. Ansem was her target, yes, and so all was fair where he was concerned, but the crew was more often caught in the crossfire. More times than Kairi
wanted to remember, she had watched a sailor’s face freeze in shock, then fall apologetically when
she met them with unwarranted hostility.

Switching to her second available tactic, Kairi became a princess of the people overnight.

Without warning, she started taking meals again – literally taking the trays up in her arms and
carrying them to the mess where the crew would be eating. The first time she’d done this, the room
had fallen silent as she delicately fit herself at the very end of a bench and started to eat without
comment. Most of the soldiers sat in fear of punishment if they continued their meal while a princess
was eating hers, and Kairi had to pause and give her permission for them to carry on. Once it became
clear she intended to eat every meal in this way, most of the men began to appreciate the novelty, and
now left a cleared spot that could easily have fit three of her right in the center of the bench.

Of course it was expected for her to dine with the Admiral, and he observed the formality of
extending a Kairi an invitation every evening without fail. These were now politely turned down
with the suggestion that he really ought to be inviting Sora to dinner as well if he wanted her
company.

Eating among the crew quickly became her favorite part of the day. Far from fearing for her safety,
the exaggerated gallantry of the soldiers was as flattering as it was amusing. Some of the men, she
could tell, had promptly discarded their manners the moment they left dry land, and now scrambled
to remember how to address a lady, when to bow, and the proper way to hold a knife and fork. The
number of elbows she saw on the table decreased dramatically in a matter of days.

Once over the social conflict of speaking directly to royalty, many of the crew wanted to hear her
account of the legendary Never Was pirates. As far as anyone knew, she was one of only two living
witnesses in their lifetime, and the other they were forbidden to approach.

Kairi told the story each time she was asked, as best she could remember, and as truthfully as she
dared. In good company and comfortably full of food and drink, her story sounded thrilling, the sort
of tale that could be easily written into song. But if the pursuit continued, if they actually seemed to
be catching up, the monsters would become real. Kairi knew the one detail that terrified someone
most would be the one to stick with them, and what would be the good of tormenting them with
fear?

Instead, as often as she could, Kairi directed her retelling towards Sora’s bravery, and Riku’s
sacrifice. She didn’t need to stretch the truth to make Sora sound heroic, and only tailored her
phrasing slightly to swap the word ‘escape’ for ‘rescue’. Both, of course, were correct, but if she was
going to rally the admiration and support of the crew, it was better to let them imagine Sora had taken
her in his arms and carried her to safety.

It was working. Every day more of the soldiers were pressing her for the story, and others declared
they would go down to the brig and thank Sora themselves. None had actually made it yet.

Not everyone was so captivated. Some men of higher rank, or greater loyalty to Ansem made claims
that she had invented the story entirely. Others claimed she was still a victim of trickery, blinded to
Sora’s true wickedness. But some of the men, Kairi noticed, never joined in on either side. They sat
quiet and didn’t interrupt when she spoke, but didn’t seem drawn either to enthusiasm or skepticism.
Once she’d started taking note of them, she saw that most finished their meal quickly and made to
leave the room the moment they’d finished, which was usually around the fourth time she was asked
to recite the story.

Mind made up, and growing tired of repeating herself, the next time she sat down with the crew,
Kairi turned suddenly to one of the silent men.
“Please, could you tell me a story today?”

The man looked up sharply from his bowl, clearly not expecting to be called on. “Me? I-…”
Something shuttered behind his eyes and the tone of surprise turned dull. “I don’t know many stories, Princess. I’m sorry.”

Undeterred, Kairi prodded, “I’ve been telling stories about myself and my friends all this time. Why not tell me a story about you?”

It must have been the wrong thing to say. The soldier tensed, cast his gaze around the boisterous gathering - which had become slightly hushed at the change in routine - then dropped it.

“There’s nothing in my life so grand as to make a story out of. Certainly nothing you’d be interested in.” The denial was hasty, but without ardor. He just sounded tired.

“But I’m sure-…” Kairi stopped herself as she took the hint.

Others were watching now. Some – mostly those who also stayed out of the revelry – looked wary as they awaited developments, likely wondering if she would put one of them on the spot next. Laughter was dying down around the table as the more talkative of their number started taking notice of her extended silence. They were glancing from her, to the man she’d addressed, to each other, and Kairi got the distinct sense that she’d trampled on a forbidden subject.

Feeling more eyes on her by the second, Kairi grasped for something to make an adequate apology and diversion in one. The man said nothing, staring lifelessly into his bowl with arms at his sides.

“He’s not trying to be rude, Your Highness,” An officer on his other side spoke up, “He’s worried, is all. His family in Radiant Garden lived right on the harbor…”

There was a sort of communal murmur of agreement, the room becoming sober in an instant. Even the candlelight seemed to dim, if that was possible.

Kairi understood at once, and felt foolish for needing the explanation at all.

A moment later, she understood what she needed to do, and should have done from the first day she arrived.

Only a handful of crewmen were willing to come forward at first, and those seemed to rush through their stories in stiff voices, pausing often to be reassured that they hadn’t bored her. Once the collective silence had been broken, a steady increase of soldiers added their voices. The greater part of those confiding in her that they hadn’t believed their grief was worth mentioning, or else they hadn’t wanted to spoil the uplifting effect Kairi’s story had on their peers.

The disaster of Radiant Garden was something they all shared. For Kairi, it was a responsibility. She didn’t have the power to rebuild their homes or protect their loved ones, not yet, but they would look to her to be a source of comfort, to return some small amount of hope. That was what she could do – what only she could do – as their princess.

If she was a princess still. No word had come from the royal family since the attack. For all any of them knew, Kairi could have already been their Queen.

The more Kairi listened, the more she began to see how… common her losses were. The empty spaces in the room seemed to become crowded with invisible people, every man’s story filling it with more lost parents, lost children, lost sisters and brothers, lost lovers, lost friends. And unlike Kairi’s parents, who would have had at least a chance of escape, there was little cause to hope for any of
She felt so… ineffectual. There was hardly anything she could say for most beyond her condolences and hollow encouragement not to give up hope. Where she could think of it, she tried to leave them all with some positive sentiment about their loved ones, but that began to feel insincere very quickly. She hadn’t known these people. She hoped pretending she had would help, but she suspected it really only helped her sound more polite. A few of the officers had family high-born enough that Kairi knew them by name, and had at one time or another exchanged small talk with. It was woefully obvious who she had more to say about.

Kairi went to bed exhausted, and quite certain she’d done nothing useful at all.

But when she dragged herself in the most upright and regal manner one could drag themselves to breakfast, the atmosphere felt changed.

It was… warmer.

More of the officers greeted her, and she knew the names to answer back with. The conversation broadened, no longer stories of adventure, or stories of great loss but just… stories.

Now that Kairi had been introduced in some small way to their friends and family, it seemed every man had some proud or amusing anecdote he’d suddenly remembered in the night and thought she’d like to hear about. Kairi listened, and soon found herself sharing memories of Namine and Sora. She was careful to leave Riku out of it, as he was still their superior officer, and she wanted none of it to find its way to Ansem.

She thought she might be taking Sora’s imprisonment a little too harshly, only because she was starting to catch herself thinking she wanted Riku nowhere near the Admiral, either.

It felt silly to limit herself to mealtimes with the degree of familiarity she’d now built with the bulk of the ship’s officers. Kairi spent most of her waking moments walking from station to station, chatting only briefly with any one man so as not to be a distraction. Mostly, she watched them work, and put in the occasional and perfectly innocent question about how their various jobs were done. She doubted how many of them would have been so obliging in explaining if they expected her to actually listen properly, and learn.

A full week had passed since Sora had been locked away. Her influence didn’t extend far enough yet that she’d felt it was safe to try and see him again, but she did learn which guards on the rotation wouldn’t begrudge her sending a portion of her meals to the prisoner outside of Ansem’s knowledge. However, the general mood on the ship had not escaped him, and she was unaware that he planned on addressing it tonight.

There was a knock on the door to her loaned quarters, and Kairi hastened to make herself presentable. She’d only recently retired from her visit around the ship, and had slackened her dress for comfort when putting her feet up.

“Just a moment,” she called, getting to her feet and ordering her appearance.

“At your leisure, Your Highness.”

The voice through the door gave her harsh pause. She hadn’t expected visitors, and least of all Ansem. Her strides towards the door were quick, and her smile very neutral.

“Admiral,” she greeted, not coldly.
“Princess,” he bowed his head in return, belying nothing. “I'd like to extend you an invitation for you and Sora to dine with me in my quarters, tonight.”

Her surprise was not hidden as well as she'd have liked. “Very well. I accept,” she blinked. “Shall we deliver this invitation to Sora now?”

“I can imagine no better time.” In a manner most indifferent, Ansem offered his arm, which she took with the same absence of feeling. There was no conversation as they swept along to the brig, and Kairi quietly settled into the tiny, perhaps premature, feeling of triumph. It took concentration to contain it.

So Ansem's hand had been bent to her will, after all. She'd known (hoped) it would be a matter of time, with the crew on her side. No doubt he was not pleased, hence his calculated detachment.

Indeed, she picked up on his coldness a little better when she listened for it, Ansem commanding the guard, “The keys, if you would.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Kairi gave the sailor a dazzling smile when he returned with the brass key ring. The two of them approached the cell at a measured pace, which felt like some sort of test – Kairi knew not to give in and rush to the bars, as such a break in dignity would reflect poorly on them both.

Hazy with monotony, Sora lifted his head and started to smile at the sight of Kairi's voluminous dress sweeping into view. The expression fell just as quickly when he realized she was not alone, though, and he scrambled to his feet. He did not appear mistreated, though the bruise around his eye was an ugly - but healing - yellowing color, and he was rather dirty from lying about on the floor. Brushing himself off, he looked from Ansem's face to Kairi's, certain that hers would show it if some horrible fate awaited him.

Releasing her and stepping aside, Ansem regarded him with a distinct drop in friendliness.

“On your feet, boy.”

Sora stood as straight as he could, and watched Ansem unlock the cell.

“The Admiral has just invited us both to a private supper,” Kairi quickly addressed the unanswered question on his face, and Sora's eyes widened.

Momentarily, he failed to understand. He wondered if there was some manner of trick or joke he'd missed out on. The lock clicked, and the door swung open.

“You must thank the princess,” Ansem interjected coolly. “She advocated for you most... determinedly.”

“You did?”

“I didn't do anything to strain myself, don't worry,” she reassured him lightly.

Sora still thought it was too soon to be relieved, but couldn't place why. “Uh... well. Thank you,” he turned to Ansem, reluctant. “And thank you, Sir.”

“An escort will come round in an hour. Try to make yourself presentable.” Ansem was eyeing his dusty, soiled clothing.
“Sora is perfectly welcome to use my quarters to clean himself up,” Kairi smiled politely. “Escorted, of course.”

Mumbling thanks again, Sora glanced between the two, trying to pick up something unseen between them.

“I am pleased you still have some sense of propriety.” Ansem turned away, keys outstretching towards the guard.

“Surely I wouldn't dream of anything improper.”

“I confess I had concerns, given the amount of time you have been spending with the crew. It hardly befits a princess.” Ansem glanced back at her, his eyes practically boring holes. “I shall see you both in one hour.”

The accusation was best not responded to. Kairi’s smile was like a shield and she dutifully expressed, “I look forward to it.”

“Well good. If you'll excuse me, I have much to attend to.”

“Of course,” she curtsied, and impulsively added, “You’re excused, Admiral.”

So she was gloating. Very slightly, and - to anyone but Ansem himself, she was sure - very subtly, she played with the power her victory had given her. It felt good, she couldn’t quite help herself.

It was better than showing her terror at being near him, anyway.

His eyes narrowed very slightly. Then he made to leave.

Kairi remained frozen as she was until the door had been closed. She sank some of her weight against the bars and exhaled.

That was that. She’d won. Sora was released – undoubtedly still a suspect, in Ansem’s eyes, but only his. Observation would prove that he could be trusted, and the Admiral would have no choice but to agree to keep him out of confinement.

“Are you okay...?” Sora had been vaguely startled by her sudden shift. She nodded breathlessly.

“Yes, I think...”

She was feeling rather like she’d confronted a dangerous animal, and barely escaped with her life. The adrenaline left her feeling much less daring.

The guard had stayed behind, and willingly gave his time to escorting the Princess and her unjustly-treated champion. Kairi would have loved to let them talk and for Sora to start swaying the crew, himself, but an hour wasn’t truthfully very much time to prepare for a formal dinner. Suitable clothing had to be found for Sora, but she discovered that several officers were more than happy to lend what they had spare when asked. The hour was spent making the most of what they had, as close to proper as they could hope for.

Kairi managed to fill him in on everything he’d missed, while Sora scrubbed his face clean and wrestled with his borrowed clothes; a shirt, trousers, and boots. She explained everything she'd been doing in the past week - her quiet stand against Ansem, rallying the crew to their cause, comforting the mourning sailors - and found herself relieved to have someone to vent her worries to.
In the end, she thought Sora looked more presentable than she’d ever seen him, and only briefly lamented a lack of a jacket. They agreed it would be best not to dress too closely to a Naval uniform, lest it be taken as an offence. Her dress was fixed as nicely as it could be, and while they would have been turned away from a palace dining table, it would serve well enough for the Admiral’s quarters.

Their escort informed them when it was time to go, and Sora walked in the best approximation of a gentleman's walk he knew. One arm was raised for Kairi, appearing to lead even as she set the pace for their steps, arm deceptively gentle on his.

Ansem opened the door at the crewman's knock, nodding to him shortly. “Dismissed.”

He saluted, and stepped aside. Kairi made sure to thank him graciously as she unwound from Sora's arm, and offered a hand up to Ansem.

Privately, Sora was kind of amazed by her. Not since they'd first met had he seen her grace in full force, and all the training, teasing, and surviving together had almost wiped that image of her from his head.

Ansem bent to kiss her knuckles. “Your Highness. A pleasure to have you join me, at last,” he cordially murmured, and led her inside. The table was splendidly arranged, a chair at either end of the table for the two occupants of authority and his desk chair moved, for the time being, to allow Sora a place to sit. A covered roast steamed on the table, basket of rolls very inviting, and three goblets of wine had already been poured. The tablecloth matched the rich red, a lurid shade that made the starkness of the rest of the room so much more evident.

“We're both honored to be invited.” The irony was completely masked from her voice, and she sank into the chair Ansem pulled out for her.

“Right,” Sora hastily jumped onto her manners, not sure how to go about them himself. Kairi indicated the seat for him, and he did his best to mimic the way she flowed into her chair. He failed to remember that a lady would be expected to sit differently, and ended up looking more like he was mocking her than anything.

“Of course.” Ansem, in contrast to them both, was rather sharp, and gave Sora a look of curt disapproval as he took his own seat. He reached over to remove the covering from the roast. “Shall I serve?”

“If you would.” Kairi folded a napkin into her lap.

That smug part of her was enjoying itself again, prodding just a little at Ansem’s dignity while she still dared. While serving her wouldn’t necessarily fall beneath it, she would take a great deal of satisfaction from ensuring he did just the same for Sora.

Sora's eyes became large and round, his stomach more aware of its emptiness the moment the succulent smell hit his nose. He was still easily impressed by anything more than basic meals, and the richness of the banquet reminded him not to bite the hand that fed. There were still things he urgently felt he needed to convince Ansem of... but now was not the time, so soon after his release from the brig.

Kairi was served first, Ansem expertly beginning to cut the meat. She adopted her most civil conversational tone while he carved.

“I hope you know how grateful I am for Sora's release. It was so kind of you to reconsider.”

Automatically, Sora chimed in, “Yes! Thank you, sir.”
He was playing possum with him now, but he hardly knew how else to calm Ansem's ire besides thanking him repeatedly.

“I'm sure there would have been outcry, if I had not,” Ansem glanced up at Kairi coolly. “Rest assured, I am still not without my suspicions, but I will have to settle for keeping a close watch.”

She couldn't help but sound pleased. “As to that, I certainly don't expect you to allow Sora freely among your crew until you're convinced of his innocence. I suggest he be kept at my side at all times. With supervision, naturally.”

“Naturally,” he repeated, eyes narrowing faintly. He served her a cut of meat, and then – to appease her further – began to serve Sora instead of himself.

“Thank you.” She waited for Sora to be served, hands in her lap, and he stammered over his surprise and another attempt to express gratitude. Ansem did not reply, bringing meat onto his plate and wordlessly indicating that they might begin their meal.

The quiet did not last long.

“I imagine Her Highness has already informed you that we are in pursuit of the Never Was.”

Sora cleared his throat, having just swallowed a mouthful of bread. “Yes, Sir. If you let me, I can tell you everything I know about them.”

“My only interest is in the recovery of my son.”

“That's what we all want, but -”

“In order to save Riku, we must be prepared,” Kairi interjected, imploring, before Sora could sound frantic. “Please, if you'll listen to what we have to say, it could save your ship from suffering the same fate as the Highwind.”

“I'd first like to know from our expert whether or not he thinks Riku still lives.”

Sora stared hard at Ansem for a few seconds, steadying himself not to snap at him. “I think they captured him alive for a reason. But if he's still alive now? I don't know...”

“We know the other captives they took have been kept alive, so there's hope for Riku,” Kairi spoke quickly. She prayed he didn't question that too deeply; she and Sora both knew that Riku had been taken prisoner for different reasons, but she needed that to stay between the two of them.

“You were also kept alive,” Ansem coldly remarked. “What reason would they need?”

Half-truthfully, Sora explained, “I don't know what they're after, but I'm sure they meant to take Riku from the start of the battle. They won't just kill him until they get...” Sora lost steam, finishing lamely. “Whatever it is they want...”

“Riku was their closest pursuer in a long time. If that was all they came after him for, he would have been killed with the rest of their crew,” Kairi agreed.

“Surely you can imagine why that is of little comfort to me.” Ansem lifted his goblet to sip.

Anger bubbled up in Sora's chest again. He wanted to lash out at him, for acting like he had a monopoly on caring about Riku. About fearing for him.

“With all due respect, Sir,” he said quietly, “I'm not telling you these things to be comforting.”
Kairi glanced at Sora, trying to warn him with a look, but he did not notice. He was looking straight at Ansem.

Meeting Sora's gaze, Ansem stared him down and drew out the moment with a drink of wine.
“Apparently, you are not telling me anything to be of use, either. You do not know if my son is alive or why he was not killed with his crew, and you would sooner see me abandon the chase while he survives on limited time. Is that correct?”

Taken aback, Sora stammered briefly as he sought a way to deny that.

“Sora doesn't want us taking any reckless action, and I agree with him,” Kairi defended. Somewhat chastened, Sora just nodded and lowered his head to resume eating.

“And what action would Sora have me take?” Ansem drawled his name as though it were a derogatory term.

Pausing, Sora needed to chew and swallow before he could answer, though truth be told, he was also stalling. “First, we have to know where they are. If we can recreate the map Captain Riku made of their movements, we might be able to find some lead.”

He doubted it even as he said it. He was convinced that all of their planning had had nothing to do with catching up to them, last time.

Impassive, Ansem prompted, “And secondly?”

Sora hesitated. He had only one idea, with no proof it would work, and absolute certainty that Ansem wouldn't like it.

“... If we can track them, it has to be in a smaller ship. Nothing grand, and nothing flying the Kingdom's colors. The fewer men in the party the better... And I need to be on it.”

In truth, it would have been better still for Sora to go alone. No one else understood the threat, and even he only stood the slim chance that Roxas’s presence on board might prevent him being killed.

“A fascinating theory. I see why Riku held you in such high esteem.”

Sora faltered, not practiced enough to know how to respond to such an indirect challenge. “Uh...”

Sipping her wine – somewhat bitter for her taste, as she was used to the sweet wines allowed to young ladies – Kairi spoke more coolly than intended. “I'm interested to hear your proposal on what should be done.”

“Because, as a princess, your knowledge of naval military maneuvers is extensive?” Ansem raised an eyebrow. “Rest assured, Your Highness, my plans do not involve studying a map for months on end while my son, and your sister, continue to suffer at the hands of pirates.”

Kairi’s hands disappeared under the table, wringing her napkin violently. There was no comfort to be found in his words - he hadn’t meant them to be. He’d wanted to hurt her with the reminder, and through all the contempt she’d shielded herself with, he succeeded.

Sora nearly dropped his knife and fork, and when he spoke, it was nothing like himself. It was toneless, and loud as he could be, without shouting.

“If you try to attack them directly, everyone on this ship will die.”
Ansem fixed him with a look as threatening as it was imperious. “I am not a fool, boy. My intention is to retrieve my son, not to charge blindly into battle. My plans are not worth discussing with a possible pirate whose focus appears to be getting to the Never Was himself, with a cadre small enough to eliminate by his lonesome if he so desired and no plan of return.”

That was further than Sora could bear being pushed. Recklessly, he wanted to pay him back some of the insult, and blurted, “It sounds more like you're covering up for having no plan at all!”

Kairi stiffened, but it was far too late to hold Sora back or tell him off.

“Really,” Ansem's voice became silky. “How embarrassing for an experienced Admiral of the Royal Navy to have less of a plan than a child.”

In contrast, Sora grew louder. “Riku's a Captain of the Navy, and he knew more about those pirates than you ever will!”

And he’d still failed. The truth that ate at Sora every moment, and the one that Ansem refused to hear. He had to understand, or it was all for nothing.

“Then I had best retrieve him,” Ansem's eyes burned into Sora. “Which I will do my way, and you will learn your place.”

For a long moment, Sora glared, mind too crowded with horrible things to say to single out one. He crammed food into his mouth instead, manners ignored in his fury, and it was down to Kairi to clear her throat and force calm.

“If you don't intend to discuss your plans with us or listen to ours, Admiral, then I fail to see why you arranged this dinner at all.” It was no use keeping the sharpness out of her attempt at diplomacy.

“Why would I ever intend on discussing tactics with children?” Ansem raised his glass. “Your behavior has been unseemly, Your Highness, and unfit for your station. I understood that this was what you wanted, and I am not your parent or nurse. You wished the boy free, so I gave in to your spoiled antics to bring them to an end.”

It was with practiced effort that she bottled her indignation, determined not to rise to that. “... I see.”

Sora kept his mouth full, so he couldn't say anything that would land him back in the brig. It was getting harder and harder to swallow, throat tight with anger, and he reached for the wine to ease the process.

One sip sent his cycling thoughts crashing to a halt. The taste was evocative of one night, and the memory was powerfully clear – Riku's lips, the stain on his sleeve, the warmth. Being told he was loved. Taking Riku into his arms, taking him inside...

They had the same tastes in wine, father and son.

Ansem watched Sora drink and waited for him to swallow, tempering his own emotions and savoring a bite before he spoke. “This, in spite of my personal misgivings about the boy. Putting aside questions of loyalty and intent, I have a strong suspicion that he has slept with my son.”

Sora, fortunately, was no longer in danger of sputtering or choking on his drink, but he was hardly subtler for it. The accusation froze him to the spot, and a swell of irrational terror made him wonder if Ansem had read his mind.

Kairi stiffened, and hoped to pass it off as shock. “That's a sudden accusation, and a very
inappropriate one to make in your company.”

“Do forgive me, Your Highness.” Ansem lifted the goblet again, watching Sora. “You're quite right, that is not a discussion for a dinner table.”

Not knowing how to deny it – not sure whether or not he should – Sora sent Kairi a look of panic. She was fighting down her own, but realized quickly that she had to fill in the silence before it could condemn him.

“No, it isn't,” she sniffed, her best impersonation of an offended royal. “But if I may say one thing on the subject – It hardly seems relevant to accuse him at all.”

“I would argue otherwise,” Ansem retorted. “If the boy was such a distraction to Riku, it furthers my belief that he sabotaged the Highwind... Be it deliberately or otherwise. The Captain was putting dangerous stock in a stranger, and rushed into a scenario he could not win. I taught him better than that.”

Kairi huffed. “Well, as promised, I won't discuss this further.”

In his panic, Sora's mouth had gone dry. He hastily reached for the goblet again, drinking deeply to quell the feeling.

“Of course,” Ansem coolly returned to his meal. “Is dinner not to your taste? You've hardly touched it, Your Highness.”

A few harsh comebacks sprang to mind, but they were buried under social grace. “Not at all,” she denied, and picked up her knife and fork again.

No sooner had Sora put down his goblet before he was reaching for it again, hardly managing to put another bite in his mouth before needing the drink. He was unexpectedly parched, dry from his lips to his gullet. Ansem ignored him completely, now.

“I was concerned you were growing more accustomed to a lower quality meal.”

Kairi spoke after a pause to swallow. “I don't have any complaints about the way my meals have been prepared, but thank you for your concern.”

Sora put down his glass and cleared his throat, though it didn't sound as though he was attempting to break into the conversation. Nonetheless, Ansem treated it as such.

“Is there a problem?”

“No,” he croaked, throat not quite recovered in his haste.

The best thing Kairi could think to do, for their safety, was direct the focus of the conversation away from Sora as much as possible. “Since you've mentioned it, I do have a few things to discuss with you on the matter of your crew.”

“Do you. I'd be interested to hear, Your Highness.”

As Kairi launched into the various observations she'd made of the crew's welfare, Sora stifled a cough into his hand. Grains of sand seemed to trickle down his raw throat, disturbing the flow of air and the tender muscles; a constant irritation, but one he could only be imagining. He'd drained his glass, felt nothing stuck in his pipe, but it persisted until it hurt. The wine felt hot in his stomach, churning away anxiously, but a creeping chill puckered his skin.
Ansem listened, mostly, but his awareness was rather gripped by Sora's struggles. Kairi only slowed when his coughs had grown so relentless that they could not be ignored.

“... Sora?”

He cleared his throat in vain again, breathlessly apologizing, “Sorry, don't mean to interrupt -”

Her eyes went wide, looking at him properly. He'd taken on a terrible pallor. “You don't look well...”

“Indeed,” Ansem raised an eyebrow. “You appear ill.”

Queasy and sweating, Sora was finally starting to really feel the sickness overtaking him. His voice was hoarse, weak from the abuse his coughs had put it through.

“I-I'll just go to bed, then...” he shot Kairi another apologetic look. “If I'm excused...”

Kairi’s napkin dropped over her plate as she jumped to her feet. Without reason or proof, an icy sense dread bloomed in her chest, and left no room for doubt. Something was wrong.

“You won't just go to bed. I'll take you to the medic myself,” she insisted.

“Nonsense,” Ansem dismissed. “The brig must have left him weak. Rest will fix him.”

Sora had begun to cough again, now violently and without stopping. It felt like all he could do to keep his throat open, and Kairi started in alarm. Her senses battled; she was convinced he was choking, but knew he hadn't put anything in his mouth.

“Sora -!”

She threw a sudden sharp look at Ansem. The Admiral had yet to even lift a finger.

“Sit down, Your Highness,” he took a languid sip of wine, and started to rise. “I'll take him to his quarters.”

Masking her panic, or anger, was an exercise in futility now. Something pulled at her, and her eyes rested on Ansem’s goblet. “I will not sit down, I - !”

There wasn't time to make conclusions. Sora had slid out of his chair, collapsing onto the floor and wheezing. He was twitching all through his body, but still trying to climb up to his knees.

A small scream broke from Kairi's lips as she fell to hers beside him, crying out his name as her hands went to either side of his jaw, turning his face towards her. His skin was burning hot, fever climbing rapidly.

For the barest second, Ansem's lips canted. “I'll have someone send for the medic, shall I.”

“Yes. Please, bring someone here now,” Kairi leapt to her feet, grabbing the pitcher of water off the table. She poured some into her own glass and brought it back to Sora's level. “Can you drink?”

He tried to reach for it, but his hand trembled too badly. She held it to his lips, supporting his head with her other hand. Ansem was going for the door languidly, but she took no heed, watching water trickle past Sora's lips. He'd barely swallowed before he started coughing again, dampening Kairi's dress.

Sora moaned. “M's-sorry...”
There were tears on her face before she could feel them falling. “Please don't say you're sorry... Someone's... going to help you...”

Ansem spoke to the man stationed outside his door. “Have the medic informed that he is to see me in my quarters, when he is available.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the officer saluted. “Is it urgent?”

“I hardly think so.”

With sickening gulping noises, Sora could not take water anymore. Panic pressed on Kairi’s ears, drowning out Ansem’s words, but she knew he was talking to someone. She gathered her skirts and ran to his side, desperate.

“Please, I don't think he can breathe...!”

“Someone isn't breathing? Sir?” The officer, alarmed, looked to Ansem.

“The medic.”

“I – yes, Sir -”

He took off hastily, and Ansem shut the door calmly behind the pair of them.

It was... displeasing, that there would be such a rush, but he still found it unlikely that Sora would survive, by the sight of him. Kairi didn't spare Ansem another thought, returning to Sora's side and finding him limp on the floor.

“Oh no... No, Sora-...” She drew him up into her arms, feeling his cheeks still warm and the tiniest brush of air against her fingers when she held them to his lips. “I don't understand...”

“Best step away, Your Highness, if he's ill... Perhaps he suffers from a weak constitution.” Ansem approached the table, pleased to see Sora's goblet utterly drained.

Wiping her eyes, she muttered, “He is anything but weak...” Lifting her gaze to meet Ansem's, her tone became defiant, almost accusing. “Riku knew that.”

She hardly knew what she was saying, anymore. All she knew was confusion, and fear, and hate, more than she could bear without forcing Ansem to share in it.

“Riku was trusted with too much too early,” he sighed delicately. “Once I have him home safe, that shall be rectified. Come away from him, Princess.”

Tears slid over her cheeks again. “I'm not going to leave him.”

“Don't be foolish.”

Swallowing hard, she repeated, “I'm not leaving him.”

Ansem seemed to grow irritable, now, approaching the pair. “How needlessly dramatic.”

“Frankly, I don't care for your opinion right now,” Kairi forced through her teeth.

“Unwise, as the ship's medic operates under my authority, not yours.”

Kairi's jaw dropped slightly, suspicion solidifying, and Ansem watched Sora with growing
satisfaction.

“If you wish for this to be dealt with expeditiously, rudeness is not the way to accomplish that. As it stands, I'm sure this is merely a spell of sickness. He'll recover.”

Her jaw set, and Kairi stared down at Sora's pale, motionless face. Ansem was holding his life over her head, giving her no other option than to play his game.

Mastering herself, the lightness of her tone came almost startling. “… You're probably right. Do you have any thoughts on the cause?”

It was an indictment without the proper words, all civility where Kairi wished there was condemnation and rage.

“Perhaps he's susceptible to something we, of Radiant Garden, have developed an immunity to,” Ansem commented. “Unknowing travelers do so often make the mistake of not double-checking what they drink.”

He could not have signed a better confession, but it wasn't one. Kairi expended a tremendous amount of effort not to glare, to hate him with every breath in her body, and put all her attention onto Sora. She did not leave him when the medic barged in with the hastiest knock, did not say a word as Ansem reported that he’d been taken by a bout of sickness (incurred during his stay in the brig, no doubt, and the medic agreed), and did not shout allegations of falsehoods, of betrayal, and of murder.

Ansem watched the procession rush Sora to sick bay, and sipped his wine.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shoot we killed Sora.
Chapter 24

The discussion, for all its length and lies, was nothing Axel hadn't expected. He'd dined in the Captain's quarters that evening, divulging everything Marluxia and Larxene had plotted and withheld, claiming he'd wheedled this and that out of Roxas, and being told what kind of repercussions he'd suffer at the first sign of treachery. Mutiny included anything that might put a wedge in Xemnas's plans, and he'd earnestly expressed having no desire to muddle things for him further.

Saix, wise to all his tricks, had watched him. Scrutinized, picked apart, and appraised every word out of his mouth. When he hadn't sniffed out signs of an inevitable betrayal, Xemnas appeared satisfied. The damage to the ship was still his to repair, but that was barely a trifle.

He left with a pick between his teeth and a whistle, on his way down into the hull. The trappings Roxas had been given to sleep in weren't easy to find; he was stored more like cargo than a person, and Axel wondered if he'd be moved to a room of his own soon. Perhaps Marluxia's. It was no secret, now, that Roxas made short work of those locks, so it seemed strangely appropriate.

No one was mourning. Roxas was in a state of dreary, fatigued thought, but he was not mourning. He turned over everything he'd seen and heard for the last few days, in his mind, and tried to make some sense of it. The Isle of Oblivion... The mutiny. Riku's ultimate fate, still to be decided unless he simply hadn't been told, and Namine's condemnation.

He faced the wall, eyes listlessly open, and listened to the creak and sway of the ship. Axel's footsteps were almost lost among the noise, but the drag of a leather sole was undeniable. Roxas turned sharply, drawing the knife from his belt.

Burning up the bit of wood in his mouth, Axel flicked ash off his smudged fingers and bent low to approach the hammock. “... Roxas.”

The blade was still out, thrust forward like a threat before Roxas had registered either sight or sound. Axel eyed it.

“I really thought you'd want to ask questions first.”

Roxas raised an eyebrow, “Are we asking questions now?”

He made himself sound more hostile than he was in truth. After all he’d seen and done, he hardly had the will left to suspect Axel. Still, there was more he needed to find out before he let the cracks in his guard show.

“No, not here, we aren't.”

Slowly, Roxas put the knife away, and slid out of the rope hammock. “... After you, then.”

Straightening up, Axel lead the way back to his quarters, and Roxas barely had time to sort out whether he wanted to be alone with him before he already was.

The door was locked behind them, and Roxas froze.

“Expecting someone?”

“I lock up all my treasure. You know that.” Axel turned from the door and went to wipe off his
hands on a rag.

The words were like an electric shock, making him tense in alarm. “Is that what this is?”

“No,” he sighed. “You're not stupid, Roxas. Would you leave it open when you were about to have a private conversation?”

Crossing his arms, Roxas looked like he was about to argue again. However, he said nothing, and shook his head.

“Good.” Axel sank onto his cot.

Remaining on his feet, Roxas stared him down for a short while before deciding to be blunt. “So, I want to know how much of what you said today was true.”

“That sounds like a good place to start,” Axel remarked, amenable, and leaned back. “Getting close to Marluxia for information was true. So was what I said about the Captain's bloodline.”

He was almost cut off with another question. “Did you know Marluxia would die?”

“Yes.”

Silently, Roxas took that in.

Without another question, Axel deigned to elaborate. “I was never completely sure we could die. I don't think *humans* could accomplish it, but I figured out that we can kill each *other*. Xemnas had a ship before we became his crew... But he did this ritual before, which means we had predecessors. Long gone ones.”

It rang true, and brought a lump to Roxas's throat. He swallowed it hard. “I can hardly remember what happened on the island, but... I'm sure Xemnas said there were others with my powers before...”

“Hn,” Axel's eyes narrowed. “Not surprised...”

“And those are long gone, too...”

Unwillingly, their shapeless presence had invaded his thoughts, and his dreams. Figures without distinct features, bearing a bright key - exactly like his, un tarnished by the centuries that might have separated them. Each dream ending as the unknown keybearer descended into the supernatural darkness of Oblivion, following Xemnas to their doom.

They spent a moment in grim contemplation before Axel prodded. “You can't remember?”

“That place...” Roxas searched for the words to describe it, but much like the effect Oblivion had had on him, the ability to focus on them slipped away. “It does something to you...”

Axel stood up slowly. “... Are you okay?”

“Of course I'm not.”

It seemed foolish to ask, now. Axel had no frame of reference as to what he should *do* about that. Instead, he prompted, “... You have more questions.”

“I have more than questions,” Roxas regained some of his edge, accusing. “You never arranged for me to meet Namine.”
He’d never needed Axel’s help in picking locks, or getting into places he shouldn’t. The idea, however false, that Axel had been pulling the strings was a deep gash in his pride. The possibility that it might be true was even worse.

A little surprised, Axel snorted. “No, I didn't. But making it sound like I did takes some heat off you. And off her.”

Grudgingly, Roxas mumbled, “I hope it does...”

“She's alive, isn't she?”

“She's only changed jailers."

“What did you think was going to happen?” Axel sighed irritably. “I could either cover for her and keep her a prisoner, or we could both watch her die. If you two had actually run, I wouldn't have been able to talk you out of it.”

Roxas was quiet, discomfited. “I have to put all my trust in you to know when to run, then?”

“Or develop some common sense. Where was there to go?”

“I-...” Roxas started strong, then squirmed. “We could have-...”

He trailed off, and Axel let the pause grow uncomfortable before going on. “You want her freed. The first part of that is keeping her alive. I did that, and saved Sora's apparent lover.”

An opportunity to change the subject; Roxas leapt on it. “What was all of that about me telling you stories about Sora?”

Eyes glittering, Axel almost smirked, apparently pleased with himself. “That was entirely improvised, what did you think?”

Roxas was far from amused.

Lies on top of lies, setting the scene for a manufactured betrayal of Roxas’s supposed confidence. Perhaps Axel called it clever, but the deception only pointed straight to Sora being back in the pirates’ grasp.

“I never gave Sora any 'power', I never knew anything about it!” Roxas glowered. “Now they'll do the same to him that they've done to me.”

Until he showed no signs of having Roxas’s powers, and he was discarded once again...

“Xemnas had written off Sora since he was thrown overboard,” Axel arched one eyebrow. “Now he's going to take us right to him.”

“Exactly. 'Us', including them.”

The look Axel gave him verged on exasperation. “Do you have another ship? Something to ferry us to your brother?”

“I didn't want him taken prisoner.”

“Xemnas thinks he needs him. He'll be safe.”

Roxas's temper flared in disbelief. “You don't know the first thing about rescuing people, do you?”
An expression of mild offense crossed Axel's face... for a moment. It gave way to a reluctant confession, “This is a first, for me.”

Suspicion darkened his thoughts. For all the tricks it had taken to send Xemnas after Sora, could Axel be counted on to think up a way off of the ship, before it was too late? The more he thought of it, the deeper his doubt was etched. Truthfully, he didn’t think a cunning escape was a part of Axel’s plans, in the end.

“Axel...” Roxas stared him down for a few seconds longer. “This isn't going to keep me content.”

“Do you think this is as far as I'm trying to go...?”

“I don't know what you're trying to do, but from where I'm standing, you're bringing me Sora like a prize. I have everything I want here, I don't want to leave anymore.” His tone changed as he parroted Axel's earlier words. “You lock up all your treasure.”

Axel approached him carefully. “If I thought he'd stay safe... You're not wrong. I would've done exactly that,” he admitted, and cautiously reached for his hand. “I don't know how to rescue, but I know how to steal. Get to what you want, first.”

Immobile, Roxas said nothing, not sure enough to either take Axel's hand or take his own away.

“... I thought you knew,” Axel muttered. “I'm on your side.”

Axel's hand squeezed his, very lightly, and a sort of tremor passed through Roxas.

“I'm only setting up the pieces. The end of the game has barely begun.”

Falteringly, he glanced up into his face. “If you tell me what that means, I'll be closer to believing it...”

Decades aboard the Never Was had taught Axel to keep the grandest plays completely in the dark, so no one could see them being executed. Not enemies, and not allies, in case those turned out to be one in the same. And now he was so close, too close for reckless risk-taking on faith.

Yet somehow, it had stopped being a question as to whether or not he was going to tell Roxas. It had become a matter of when, and this was the only time.

“I'm going to kill Xemnas.”

Expression slackening, Roxas unconsciously squeezed Axel's hand back.

“Marluxia didn't have everything wrong,” Axel spoke very quietly, unwilling to discount the idea that someone might have their ear pressed to the door. “He wanted his heart, but if he couldn't have that, freedom would do.” His gaze became distant, as though thinking over a list he'd made and remade a few times. “Namine could be released to wherever it is she came from. The Captain will be traded, to capture the Admiral – they're deciding on the details right now. You can have Sora, and you'd go... wherever you chose. None of us would be chasing a lie, anymore.”

Not unobservant, Roxas said, “You've left yourself out of that.”

“I haven't decided what'll happen to me.”

“You should.”

“It'll depend.”
“On whether you can get away with it...?”

“Whose side you're on.”

Roxas went silent again. In some private part of his chest, Axel already knew that, ultimately, he would be on Sora's.

“I brought you here to offer you mine,” he murmured, nonetheless. “I've told you everything, now.”

It felt like minutes, to Roxas, before he'd come up with what he wanted to say. He couldn’t agree outright, not without setting some conditions “… If you want more convenient childhood memories from me, you'll have to tell me what they are first.”

“I think that was all I needed. I could make something else up if I have to.” Axel's eyes glowed brighter, and Roxas began to smile very slightly.

“You're going to have to let me in on these things if I'm going to trust you…”

“And how'll you earn my trust?”

What more did Roxas have to bargain with? What secrets did he still have worth hiding?

“However you want me to, and I'll start now.”

The beginnings of a smirk faded into something more serious, and Axel drew away from him a little. “… I can trust you if you don't go trying to talk to Namine, or Riku. Don't go wandering any more places you shouldn't be. Don't give me more to explain. No matter what the Captain or Saix does…”

Considering the offer, Roxas imagined them laying hands on her, hurting her. Without a bigger picture, he might have declined. Told Axel that he couldn't possibly leave her. The image was replaced with Xemnas, dead or dying, and the look on Namine's face when she found out she could go home.

He'd agree. Only one potential danger came to mind, and he wasn't sure how to retrieve it without the risk of being found.

“I was going to break into Marluxia's room one last time,” he admitted heavily. “To get something.”

“If your palms are itching that badly, I'll let you steal from me. I'll take my things back, guaranteed, but if it'll keep you out of trouble…”

“It wasn't to steal,” Roxas silenced him with a look, without even bemoaning the loss of Axel's trinkets or coins. “I left Namine something… A jar and a lid. I need to take it back, before anyone else finds it…”

Axel's expression became quizzical. “An empty jar?”

If the two of them were on the same side... Roxas could tell him. “I filled a jar with light, for her. It looks empty until the lid's put back on... It was a gift. All the time Marluxia made her spend in the dark...” he explained, eyes darting to the floor, because he felt he had to. “I need to get it back for her. I don't know if there'll ever be a chance to give it to her again, but I can’t let someone else take it or figure out what it is.”

“That might get you both in more trouble,” Axel agreed, brow knit as he surveyed him. “They don't need any more reason to think you're conspiring with prisoners... I'll find it.”
Shoulders losing some of their tension, Roxas nodded his thanks.

“So you won't do anything more to draw attention to yourself?”

“... I won’t... But I want to stay close to you,” he bargained, by way of saying yes.

Axel hadn't expected another condition, but would never be inclined to argue it. “I've always been happy to oblige that.”

“Deal.” Roxas closed the distance between them again, and his chin was tilted up to kiss Axel. In spite of all that'd happened he was surprisingly willing, head tilting back to return it, and Axel was glad for it.

He'd been overcome by determination to have this one more time, honestly amazed they were both still alive.

He wouldn't be too brazen, yet. One hand ran up to Roxas's jaw, idly brushing it over with his thumb. The gesture bordered on tender, enough so to confuse Roxas into parting his lips, and the almost-greedy way Axel took his mouth was a great deal more familiar. That was the Axel he knew, and his fervor rather relaxed him.

The shift from bartering to seduction had been abrupt, but somehow seamless. Apart from one thing - Roxas didn’t feel like he was being seduced. It wasn’t the same as before, he couldn’t help noticing. He wasn’t being swept away by a rogue, giving into lust with the vague notion - perhaps justification - that this was part of a game each was playing with the other, to some end.

There was no motive he could find anymore for wanting Axel. That alone should have terrified him.

Temperature climbed as Roxas's hands briefly groped at him and settled on Axel's waist, appreciating the heat of fingers running through his hair. Growing a little bolder, he started experimenting with how hard to could press Axel back, how much he could demand. He was not disappointed as he was drawn in, Axel backing up towards the bed.

Barely breaking the kiss if he could help it, Roxas grinned helplessly when they parted, coaxed into Axel's lap while he settled back.

“We could pick up where we left off, last time,” Axel suggested, and Roxas could have melted on top of him.

“I like the sound of that...”

With that confirmation, Axel recaptured the kiss with more need. Much like the last time, Roxas was hardly sure of himself, but he couldn’t concern himself with that when he was so caught up in kissing him. This time, he was the one to work Axel's lips apart.

He was trying to get as much contact as possible. Hands went up Roxas's back and down his sides, sucking his tongue briefly when it invaded his mouth and Roxas moaned, the sound vibrating against Axel's lips.

Thumbs ran along Axel's belt, and he took the hint. He unclasped the buckle, giving Roxas the freedom to push up his shirt.

There were still kisses, when they could steal them, but Roxas was pulling the loose cotton off of him and Axel was tossing aside his belt. The shirt went over Axel's head, and Roxas let him sort out the arms while retook his mouth.
“Mmn...” Letting Roxas take the lead, Axel distractedly wrestled his shirt off and flung it to the floor.

That was much better. Hands sliding up to cradle his jaw, Roxas sat himself up on his knees to overpower and probe with his tongue. Axel had to brace himself to stay upright, body heat accidentally flaring – he liked having Roxas over him like this, and Roxas liked that heat.

“Mn -” Roxas grasped him harder and shuddered. Willingly, Axel tilted his head back more while a hand twisted in his shirt, and Roxas seized the opportunity to loom over him more.

They were melding together so well, and the lack of experience was far less of a factor than Roxas's urges. He nipped Axel and elicited a low, encouraging moan. Curious, he bit down on his lip again, and didn't let go right away, tugging the flesh between his teeth.

This time, Axel's groan was unabashed, and seized Roxas's hip tightly. Breath lost, he pulled away and exhaled, looking down at Axel's reddened lips.

A bit drunkenly, he demanded – requested, maybe – “More...?”

“Mm...” Purring, Axel rolled them over to press Roxas back to the cot while deftly sliding his pants down his hips. He sat up enough to give him the full view, and Roxas's eyes traveled down his body with a small, approving smirk.

Clothing ridden of, Axel descended on him and kissed his throat, overwhelming him in the best way. Roxas's burn was nearly healed, by now, and only prickled when his searing lips passed over it. He rather enjoyed the fluttery sparks of pain, and tilted his head back to keep them going.

Very subtly, Axel's motives in feeling him up had changed. His hands slid under his shirt and drifted, exploring and inspecting for injury. He wasn't surprised when Roxas inhaled sharply, and paused in passing over his bruised ribs.

“Seems I need to take better care of you,” he commented, lifting his shirt. All along his right side, purple-black splotches colored his skin like an ugly tattoo.

“If that means you're planning to be tender with me now,” Roxas murmured, “don't.”

He did not reply. He removed the shirt, and kissed him hard – far more direct and demonstrative than words. Wantonly, Roxas arched up to him, palming Axel's bare skin until he was shifting, moving away.

Not away – aside, giving Roxas room to dominate again. He rolled onto his side and threw one leg over Axel, shifting closer together and pressing their hips together. They were grinding, getting flush to each other's body, and Roxas barely had a moment to unlace his own pants with a hiss.

Humming, Axel kissed his jaw and neck, lavishing more careful attention against the burn. A gasp climbed Roxas's throat, getting distracted by the delicious twinges from the burn and rocking against him instead.

“You like the pain?” Axel inquired roughly. “Or the warmth?”

“Mm, just like the feeling, I don't know...”

Purposefully, Axel dragged the tip of his tongue over the mark in one long, slow lick, and Roxas shivered. He hastily worked his pants down over his hips.

A brutal tease, his hands started to slide down to Roxas's length but diverted back up, awaiting some
guidance. Sliding off, Roxas discarded the breeches and climbed over Axel's hips, grabbing warm hands to direct them back the way they'd been heading.

Smirking, Axel wrapped it around his cock, and his palm started to get hot.

“Ah-...” Roxas's eyes closed tightly, pushing into his hand. It was just as warm as he remembered Axel's mouth being...

Stroking him slow, Axel's mouth resumed working over his throat with low sounds of want, murmuring between kisses. “Everything about you... You're fantastic...”

“Nn...” He was having a hard time thinking, let alone dominating, with Axel's too-warm hand around his erection and his voice at his ear. He dragged his hands down his chest, nails finding spots to catch almost without thinking, and Axel moaned loud. Responsively, his thumb went around the crown and he started to stroke faster. Roxas's eyebrows raised.

Experimentally, he dragged his nails down to Axel's hips, and he shuddered.

“That's good...” God, he'd missed the sting of nails.

“You want more than this, don't you?”

Axel hissed. “Yes...”

“Then...” Roxas pushed his hand away, which retreated up his chest instead, and climbed back a little to let him move. Axel shifted into a better position on the mattress, and Roxas stared down at him with a lick of his lips.

Straddling his hips, he watched Axel reach far above his head to blindly sought the oil.

“Don't worry about breaking me.” When Roxas's eyes widened, Axel smirked. “Relax... I mean, I can take it a little rough.”

He reddened and reached for the bottle. “Of course you can.”

Axel's hand slid up Roxas's arm to his shoulder, once it was free, and brought himself up to heatedly kiss him. Roxas let himself relax, melting into it.

“You're sure you want me to do this?” he muttered against his lips. Axel practically growled.

“God, yes.”

That was certain enough to allay his worry. Roxas sat up, kneeling on the bed between his legs and working open the bottle, while Axel sank back and shamelessly arched to show himself off.

“You're more tempting than I thought...” Once he was done staring, he figured out how he wanted Axel positioned, angling his hips up before beginning to slick his fingers.

Axel pulled one leg up, spreading them wider, and grinned. “And here I thought you knew value on-sight... Maybe you're not such a good pirate after all.”

“You don't want to goad me.”

Turning his hand over, he rubbed one fingertip experimentally over Axel's entrance, and ran the palm of his other hand up his thigh. Pliant, Axel's head tilted back.
“Ngh... You're pretty when you're riled up...”

Feeling the muscle give with the faint pressure he applied, Roxas pushed his finger carefully inside. He was almost surprised by the relative ease with which he could work into him, but less so by the heat; relaxed and burning, Axel was tempted to pull him down and convince him, through whatever means, to rush the preparation.

He didn't. He wanted the teasing almost as badly as he wanted to be under Roxas's power. He didn't get nearly enough opportunity to exert it, and it was honestly something to behold.

“You're burning, inside...” Roxas was hushed.

“Harder to control when I'm... Ngh...”

Though his fingers weren't all that long to begin with, Roxas still glanced up at his expression as he pressed one inside him fully. Axel rolled his hips, encouraging.

“A little bit... lower...”

“Lower...” A little perplexed, Roxas tried to do as he was asked, finger moving and curling as it worked. Axel's breath caught, and he exhaled an expletive.

“Like that.”

More warmth settled between Roxas's legs, reacting to Axel's clear approval, and he swallowed while attempting to angle his finger against the same spot. One leg wrapped around him, and Roxas let Axel pull him closer. Stroking against the nerves, he starting pumping his finger in and out, getting a sense of the motion.

Biting his lip, Axel muffled his groan, jolts of pleasure overtaking everything. If there was discomfort, it didn't matter enough to process.

“You're incredible to watch...” Roxas whispered, awed.

As though wanting to prove Roxas right, Axel almost laughed as he stretched out deliberately to show himself off, and accidentally exhaled steam. Helpless to a grin, Roxas leaned forward to press his lips against Axel's chest, testing the warmth of his skin.

It was like kissing coals, but the pain wasn’t enough to mind.

“That's some trick...”

“And you do make teasing an art form,” Axel almost purred. Roxas was broken out of the heady banter by surprise.

“Teas... Oh.” He drew his finger back, almost out of him entirely, before starting to add a second. He hadn't realized how slow he was going.

Axel made a sound, equal parts amusement and relief. “I guess it comes natural, to you...”

Roxas flushed so brightly he was almost glowing, until he actually was. Axel grinned hazily, admiring the light, while Roxas adapted to how much tighter he felt on two of his fingers. Still sort of stunned by the sight of him, he started twisting and scissoring them, seeing what that could get him.

“Nngh, Roxas...”
Remembering his plan to kiss a path up Axel's chest, he resumed where he left off. Every touch was enjoyed and leaned into, content under his ministrations and opening up to him easily.

Pressed against Axel's thigh, Roxas's erection was starting to twitch and ache for attention, but it went ignored for the moment. Recalling what it felt like to be bitten, Roxas scraped his teeth over a nipple and got a spike of heat in approving reward.

“Rox...” he hissed, leg pressing up into his cock to lend Roxas a little stimulation.

“Ngh...” Biting back a groan, blue eyes flickered to his face. “You'll tell me when you want to keep going?”

“Now,” Axel implored roughly. “I'd like more now.”

Roxas sat up hurriedly and twisted his fingers again as he added a third. The stretch was just on the cusp of uncomfortable, but Axel reveled in that.

“Yeah, that's good...”

Pausing the moment all three were inside and letting Axel shudder, Roxas slowed as he spread them out in search of his sweet spot. His thigh pressed up against his cock, shifting purposefully as Axel's eyes slipped closed.

“Nn-... Right there, that's perfect...”

“Ngh, Axel... You're very distracting...”

“Just think about how hot I'll be around your cock...” he teased, breathless. “See how long you can resist.”

Roxas stroked him inside with a sound of strained longing, and he shuddered.

“Ngh, Roxas... You can just do it, I don't care...”

“Really?” He sounded embarrassingly eager, and tried to soften it with excuses. “You know I'm not as familiar with this.”

“I told you,” Axel purred, coaxing, “I won't break.”

There was still a second of hesitation when Roxas slid his fingers from him, part of his deliberation being marveling at the heat, but he was drawn down to kiss briefly.

“Fuck me.”

The final vestiges of reluctance were defeated completely. Only just remembering to slick oil over his shaft, Roxas adjusted himself on his knees and brought Axel's leg up higher. He needed to support it to hold Axel the way he wanted him, and he discovered that he needed to align his cock with his other hand to press into the resistance of muscle.

“Ngh...”

After feeling like he'd been tortured with the wait for *this*, Axel was almost too hot. Roxas nearly buckled over him before he was even halfway inside, blissful scalding heat and friction and the *sight* of him almost too much to bear; he'd stretched his arms out over his head to brace against the wall, arching up and taking him, breath gone.
The sound Roxas made was somewhere between a gasp and a whimper. Axel almost laughed, but he was too far into sensation to be indignant to his amusement.

Axel had decided in an instant that he didn't care, if Roxas didn't last long. He wasn't used to having anyone react to him like this, and he was a little smug for it. His past lovers would have rejected him, by now, forced him to cool off before they continued, but Roxas...

Roxas looked at him with clouded eyes, glowing as though through mist.

Breaths still carrying a whisper of a snicker, Axel's hips rocked shallowly. “You can move, I can take it however hard you want to go...”

“Mn-...” The sound was vaguely affirmative, and Roxas adjusted his hold on Axel's leg to thrust the rest of the way in with a shaky groan. He was getting off on the stretch, feeling being taken throughout his whole body. Axel didn't think he could get enough.

One hand braced on the bed by Axel's head as Roxas leaned over him, murmuring, “Never felt anything like you before...”

“Good...” Wrapping around him, he purred. “Call me selfish, but I want you to crave me.”

His moan was of shameless bliss, wanting to be wrapped up in Axel completely. “I'd-... Nn, expect nothing less.”

In one slow stroke – agonizing in his care, enough to surprise Axel; he'd thought he would be rougher, only having Saix and Marluxia to compare him to – Roxas drew his hips back. He felt every inch of him, basked in it, and then thrust forward. It was inexperienced, neither smooth or even.

But the heat was incredible and Axel had moaned, was clutching at him like he wanted to keep Roxas over top of him for the rest of his life, was kissing anywhere he could. The rare hitch in their rutting barely slowed them down, and Roxas wouldn't, or couldn't.

He wanted to drive into him, over and over, and kiss him. He wanted to kiss him, and met Axel's lips clumsily with a clipped groan. The smoldering warmth seeped into every part of him, brightening his glow ever more as pleasure mounted.

It was too much to look at. Shutting his eyes against the light, Axel pressed closer and groaned without restraint against his lips.

“Mm...” Roxas's moans mingled with his as the arm that was supporting him trembled. His control was slipping with his stamina, thrusts fast and erratic, not rough but so unabashedly needy.

Wisps of smoke curled through the heavy air as one of Axel's hands scorched a hole through his sheets. Roxas felt the other, recognizing the rapid tingling of his skin starting to burn where his fingers gripped his shoulder. Breaking the kiss, he groaned Axel's name, tone pleading.

He didn't even pause to think about what Roxas was asking for. Screwing his eyes shut tighter still and tensing with the strain of holding back, his hand slid away from his shoulder towards his throat.

Fingertips brushed the burn, and Roxas choked on a cry. His hips stuttered before he buried himself in Axel as deeply as he could, orgasm stealing the breath from him and never had he felt this light. His world had spun magnificently out of control into a realm of pleasure he never wanted to leave, and Axel was kissing him firmly, seeking his lips without seeing, and seeing only the glow even through closed eyes.
The pain had faded when Axel's hand slid around to the back of his neck, instead, but the thrum of adrenaline hadn't gone yet. He still felt his body buzzing, and kept moving in shallow, slight rocking motions – the slow-down gave Axel a chance to regain some control of his temperature before it could spike more wildly. Roxas rested heavily atop of him, and sank into the kiss with progressively more laziness.

Who cared for air when Axel was kissing him like this, deep and hard...

“Mn...”

Slowly, Roxas opened his eyes. He could still feel Axel hard against him, his relaxation having taken nothing away from his fire.

“You haven't...”

“So close, though, give me a little more...”

Reaching down between their bodies, Roxas wrapped a hand around his cock with an initial jolt. It wasn't unlike touching red-hot metal, enough at first to make him to jerk his hand back by an inch.

Axel's hips bucked up when it felt like he was moving away, hissing obliviously. “I need...”

The shock faded. Really, he was no hotter outside than he had been within. Prepared, Roxas wrapped a hand around and stroked him properly, the heat right on the edge of ‘too much’ on his sensitive palms.

It was absolutely worth it for Axel's groan of relief and appreciation, arching up and wrapping around him.

“How have you not set fire to the sheets yet?” Roxas murmured, hand growing tighter.

“Trying not to...” he sounded strained. “Have before...”

Ultimately, that effort came to nothing. Axel was so close, and then he wasn't, shuddering violently with the flood of pleasure and the control he had slipped. The sheet burned right through, his hand clutching ash where there had been linen moments ago and the cinders threatened to spread.

Satisfaction mingled pleasantly with amusement as Roxas watched. The tense expression of bliss, followed by a focused and pleased grin as Axel snuffed the burgeoning flames. He almost melted into the cot when he'd finished, and Roxas fluidly slid to lie down beside him.

He was far too bright to look at, and Axel wasn't going to try. It was a shame, though... he'd bet he was quite the vision.

“That was phenomenal...”

Roxas, not suffering for the light, was able to stare at Axel as much as he wished. “So I can please you...”

“You didn't know that?” Axel's smirk was lopsided and lazy, voice a deep purr.

“There's a difference between pleasing and having a pleasing body,” Roxas countered knowingly.

“Mm...” Shifting onto his sides, Axel dared to open his eyes to slits and ran an idle hand up his torso. “Both apply to you.”
Leaning in closer, Roxas kissed him slowly, and his light started to ease with fatigue to something more bearable. Axel kissed back in an easy manner until Roxas was breaking away, and opened his eyes properly to let Roxas meet them.

Grinning lazily, he muttered, “Glad we got that... Before...”

Roxas faltered. “Before we might not be able to...?” he filled in for him.

“... Before we fetch your brother,” Axel corrected quietly, and Roxas didn't say anything to that. He was almost certain he didn't need to. Saving him from any pressure he may have felt from a pause, Axel kissed him again very lightly, languidly, and muttered, “If we're lucky, we'll find a little more time.”

“If we're clever, you mean.”

“If we're clever.”

Roxas may have said something more, but he faltered just-perceptibly. Something had fluttered inside him, giving him pause.

“... What is it?” Missing nothing, Axel searched his expression.

“I felt-...” Roxas looked away, realizing how ridiculous he was for having been about to say... “No, nothing.”

“You felt?” Axel was impassive.

“Probably the heat...”

Although unconvinced, Axel started to get up. So soon after trust had tentatively been established, he didn't want to doubt Roxas for anything. “Then I should cover myself up. That can't be helping.”

“Now you're trying to punish me,” Roxas said after a swallow, trying to convince himself of his lie.

“For all the cruelties you've ever shown.”

He managed half a smirk before a second falter, going perfectly still. Another sensation had taken hold in his chest, distinct from the first which had come gazing at Axel.

Just as strong but in the complete reverse. Cold, cloying—... ripping, drowning. A burn like ice twisted his stomach and slashed up his throat, leaving a sweet, rotten sort of tang in his mouth. He could have sworn he’d just been sick, but he’d been sitting paralyzed all the while.

Eyeing him, Axel pulled on his shirt. “... The heat?”

Something was pushing in on his skull, crawling into his eyes, trying to crush him -

Almost inaudible, Roxas mumbled, “Something's wrong...”

“... What is it?”

“I don't know.”

Axel sank next to him on the bed, appraising him closely as Roxas became... smaller. His arms wound around himself, his stare straight ahead as he began to shiver and shrink.
Whatever he was responding to, it seemed more than emotion... Or was it? Perhaps Axel couldn't remember. But what he was experiencing was... sharp, and he didn't understand.

“Something's happening...”

“I need to...” Roxas unwound from himself and got all the way to his feet before losing the burst of purpose. He staggered, and Axel pulled him back to the bed.

“Don't. No one can see you like this.”

“What...?” Roxas looked hazy. He was restless with panic, but simultaneously exhausted.

“You're weak. What's happening...?”

“I don't know, I -...” With a hard swallow, Roxas repeated more levelly, “I don't know.”

“... Is it Sora?”

“... God, I hope not...” Clammy to the touch, Roxas leaned into Axel, staring without seeing much of anything. “This is-... It's worse than feeling him in the water...”

The worst sort of fear, the quiet vibrating terror of a doom too late to run from.

If it was Sora, what could possibly be doing this to him? How could Roxas do anything from here?

Axel merely wrapped around him, troubled. Roxas was shivering and sweating, the warm light off his skin turning stark and sickly. He moaned something under his breath, not unlike pleading, and Axel could only hold him. He didn't know what else to do.

He felt... afraid.

It took Roxas a very long time to unwind, even a little, from his posture rock-hard with tension. He murmured about needing to lie down, and Axel complied without a word, let Roxas wrap his arms around him and sink into the cot.

They were flush together, but Roxas felt abruptly, horribly, more alone than ever before.

Kairi would not leave Sora's bedside. She sat a silent vigil, pale with worry and a sleepless night, but she refused to rest. Every blink seemed to take too long when she was monitoring him, keeping close watch for every sign the ship's medic had warned her of.

He had not regained consciousness, positioned to lie on his side lest he be sick in his sleep and choke on it. His skin had taken on a sickly gray hue, his breathing terrifyingly shallow. Although the medic had administered all manner of treatment they had – a great deal of fluid and a basin for when his body rejected them, cool cloths to keep the fever down and thick wool clothing to keep from catching cold – she hadn't noticed any major improvements. Still, Kairi would not allow him to worsen under her watch. She felt his cheek with the back of her knuckles, dipped the damp cloth into water, and noted in the back of her mind that she'd been to send for more soon. It was nearly room temperature, now.

While she had been tending to him, though, she had been unwittingly providing Ansem with another
facet to his convincing arguments. A groundwork had been laid by the Princess herself, and the Admiral had not found any trouble in building from it. A brief discussion with the medic, and he was striding in, his steps light even on a creaking ship.

She had not even noticed. What a sight the pair of them made, wan and unwelcome both. As irritating a presence Kairi had become, her insistence that Sora be attended to opened up the opportunity to solve that problem...

"Your Highness. I'll ask you to come away from him."

Kairi sat up straight, cursing herself for letting Ansem sneak up on her. "I'm afraid I'm needed here," she refused, in a manner that had made it clear numerous times among the court that the discussion was at its end.

Unfortunately, Ansem had no intention of letting her decline.

"And I am afraid you are needed in your room, Princess. The medic will be down shortly, but you... Best to keep you away from the crew, now."

Though she stiffened, she did not let her fear show. "I believe I made myself clear. I am not leaving Sora's side."

"Forgive me," Ansem's lip curled, "I must not have been clear. You are not being given a choice."

Sharply, Kairi got to her feet. She met his gaze with a steely calm. "I see. You need me out of the way."

"I am concerned for your health. Who knows if what ails Sora is contagious..."

He'd managed to convince the crew as much. That whatever had happened to Sora, it was a product of a poor orphan's upbringing in a distant land. He had been taken from a faraway tavern, of all things; a tavern boy in the company of pirates could have contracted any number of things, and no one could say with certainty that Kairi's proximity to him did not put her at risk.

She had made herself well-loved by his crew. They would sooner see her quarantined and unhappy, than sick and dying.

Livid, Kairi threw caution to the wind and bit back, "I'm no medic, but I know there is nothing contagious about the contents of a wine glass."

A disgust had filled her, one she'd never known the like of. Ansem's guilt was no secret between them, yet he wouldn't even acknowledge her accusation, as if he could force Kairi to doubt it, herself.

"Do be careful, Your Highness." Ansem became cold. "I am only trying to ensure Sora's fate does not also befall you."

She saw the threat in his words, knew beyond doubt that he was capable of murder. If the medic had been much longer, Sora would have died. If attention to his care happened to slip, he still might. She was desperately trying not to be afraid.

"If you are not careful, the things you say could be taken for treason."

"In what way, Your Highness?" Ansem arched an eyebrow. "My display of concern is treasonous, to you?"
She’d played and lost. But she would lose with dignity, and a threat for good measure.

Kairi narrowed her eyes. “You wish to silence me, Admiral, and I cannot stop you. But if you allow neglect to kill Sora, I assure you, I won't stay silenced for long.”

“Don't be silly, it does not become a Princess. Come, now,” he admonished, patronizing.

“The only thing I still don’t understand is why,” she continued fiercely. “Sora has never been any threat to you. You suspected him, but it would be safer to allow the matter to come to court. If he'd been found guilty, he'd be executed with no blood on your hands.”

Ansem sighed. “Your Highness... This is incredibly irrational.”

She carried on as though he hadn't spoken. “And if you wanted him killed quickly, you could have ordered someone to take a knife to his cell. No one but the assassin would have known until it was too late. There is one thing I understand about poisoning, Admiral – it's personal.”

Kairi had broken through, at last. Ansem's ire flared to life, eyes briefly alight with malice as he snapped, “One who knows nothing can understand nothing, Your Highness.”

She was too angry and too frightened to feel the sting of his insult. His opinion of her was the last of her concerns. “I think I do understand, actually.” She took a bold step forward, putting herself between Ansem and Sora. “You want Sora dead simply out of spite. Because Riku loved him.”

Already, Ansem's composure was back. The flash of anger had been bright and deadly, like lightning striking the water, but there was no trace of it left. His voice was cool, his stare level. “My son may have thought so, but if that was the case, his judgment was clouded. Perhaps he found this common boy novel. Regardless, to suggest I want him dead – or that I would kill him, myself – suggests you are hysterical or worse, which confirms my belief that you are being affected by this peasant illness he's contracted. Now, I give you one final opportunity. You may come with me to your room, or I will have you dragged.”

Tears had begun to form and clung to her lower lashes, simply because she didn't understand. She couldn't understand why he would harbor such intense hate for someone his son loved. Ansem was a powerful man. He had been born with authority, and worked for his command. Someone in his position should not have been capable of pettiness, but the low to which he'd stooped so easily was what had her more terrified than anything.

“I hope you know if you do succeed in bringing Riku home, he's never going to forgive you.” She threw the words like a lash.

Ansem’s fingers closed cage-like around her upper arm, wrenching it to forcibly escort her. “Poor dear. What is this sickness is doing to your mind...”

Kairi's eyes streamed in spite of herself as she was hauled away, blurring her vision when she cast one look back at Sora. She prayed it wasn't her last, and only resisted the urge to scream at Ansem because she knew it would bolster his case. He hauled her to her quarters, barely slowing even as she stumbled every few steps, and pushed her through the door to her room.

She yanked herself back and away from him the moment she was able, standing straight and brushing herself off. Glaring, she watched him remove a key from his pocket, holding it aloft in a mocking way.

“I suggest you get comfortable.”
Ansem closed the door, and she heard it lock from the other side. There would be no way to open it from within.

She waited until his footsteps were gone before throwing herself on the bed in frustration. This little room – only a lantern and porthole for light, only a bed for comfort – was no prison. The brig didn’t even provide those barest of luxuries. That didn’t change the reality she understood of her situation.

Kairi had been made a prisoner, and no one could save Sora from within a cell.
Chapter 25

The Never Was crew was not entirely back to form, but nonetheless poised for action, no matter how it may have looked to an onlooker from afar. There were still several of them down in the hull, and Vexen had actively campaigned to be among that number with his trio, but to no avail; Lexaeus may have still been recovering, but he still cut a terrifying figure and was needed to provide cover. Zexion had been set a task, and stood between the two men with a hand poised on his open book, practically hidden.

Not far from them stood Axel, looming over Riku without giving him even a mite of attention. Saix, perhaps, would have been a more attentive guard, which was precisely why he'd been given the more disruptive charges. Roxas was below, with Namine; everyone anticipated that bringing Sora to him would incite trouble again, and as such Xemnas had forgone having his favorite nearby. Axel, in his new tentative position of ally, would serve just as well; it wasn't as though Riku would be any difficulty. He looked haggard and his eyes glassy, thoroughly bound and gagged by a cloth tied around his head. He was completely outside of Axel's concern.

The Hollow Bastion, coming towards them in one straight, focused line, had his fixation. The sea was calm; the sky, clear. Conditions favored the Navy, for a change, and he wondered if they found that suspect.

Ansem was minding the pale ship closely for any signs of a storm, any stirrings of unnaturalness at all to speak of. The reports from the crow's nest seemed to confirm what he'd believed to begin with, however; the stories of impenetrable fogs, changeable winds, and warping currents were apparently all wild fancies and fear mongering.

The whelp withering in sick bay had perpetuated those rumors so strongly that even the Princess had been convinced... But then, the imagination of a young woman was easy to capture, to influence.

Ansem had his officers ready the cannons. He wanted the Never Was to know he was not afraid. He'd seen through the tales of a monster crew, and heard from his lookout that they had only a handful of crew up top.

Demyx lazed about on deck, sprawled as he plucked away at his sitar. The manipulation of the currents was minimal – more of a priming, prepared to keep any wreckage afloat if it came to that. He and Xaldin could hold the ship utterly still on a raging sea... and, while it would be more convenient not to have to hold the pieces together, it was within their power.

“Tell him not to get overexcited,” Xemnas commanded Luxord. “I want their vessel fragile, not destroyed.”

He wanted a display. He would not give the Admiral the impression that he was a man who could be made to submit, among the other ideas he wanted this meeting to give him.

“Yes, Captain.”

Time slowed for Luxord, only. The hatch to the hull was opened, and closed. At a speed that hardly beset the haste with which Xemnas wanted a message delivered, Luxord strolled down to the artillery and let time catch up with him once more.

Xigbar's grin almost split his face, having been watching for the Hollow Bastion through the open ports, eager to get her flank within firing range. The slow match was not yet lit, but still held at a
practiced distance from his body. He was unperturbed by Luxord appearing instantaneously at his side.

“We're maiming, not murdering,” he relayed nonchalantly.

“Yes, yeah,” Xigbar sneered. “Just pretty 'er up a bit, I got it.”

“They hardly let you have any fun, do they?”

“Fun comes when the work's done and the boss is happy.” Xigbar seemed to have something in mind, and it was no gamble to guess what.

Chuckling low, Luxord stayed to observe. “The moment we're in range…”

“Tell 'im I got it. Unless you want to stay for the show.”

“I'm always one for excitement.” Luxord unscrewed the mouth of his flask. “I'll give good odds if you want to bet they'll surrender.”


“Your loss.”

Rolling it over in his mind, Xigbar sat back and turned his visible eye Luxord's way. “… What're you betting?”

“First with our new playmate.” Luxord took a casual sip, and Xigbar's eyebrows almost met his hairline. His interest had undeniably been captured, but his skepticism held his hopes down.

“Assuming the boss throws us his scraps.”

“I'll give even better odds on that.”

Licking his scarred lips unconsciously, Xigbar considered. “Alright, you're on.”

Luxord smirked and inclined his head towards the cannons. “You'd best get ready.”

He said it as though Xigbar hadn't already prepared everything, which might have irked him if he weren't in such high spirits. Looking out the ports, Xigbar's lip curled. They were nearly upon them.

“Want to be useful?”

The deep sigh gave an impression that Luxord was much put upon. “I may as well.”

“Light those,” Xigbar indicated, passing him the slow match – remarkable that they still had them on board, as it'd been a long time since he'd even had to use it. Luxord took it by the handle with mild distaste.

“Grunt work... If only Larxene were still here…”

“Don't let anyone upstairs hear you say -”

Xigbar was interrupted, jerked back as the ship was rocked by sudden fire from the Hollow Bastion. His loud expletives were slowed to nonsensical, fractured syllables as Luxord warped time, igniting the match's end in the blink of an eye.
With a snarl, Xigbar lit up their counterattack, while Luxord drank from his flask with a chortle.

On deck, only Xemnas and, apparently, Riku managed to hold their footing. Fire sprung from Axel's palm, an ingrained reflex.

“Let Xigbar handle it until I give the word,” Xemnas reprimanded, but appeared utterly calm. “Remember... Normalcy.”

“And if they've been warned by Sora?” Axel extinguished it.

“It takes little to undermine a ghost story.”

Their cannons tore through the Hollow Bastion's hull, wood splintering explosively and sparking a frenzy of motion among the crew. Ansem had to clutch the rails to avoid being thrown back, sailors rushing to inspect the damage and begin their retaliatory measures.

“Shame. It's such a pretty boat,” Luxord drawled, barely audible over return fire and the loud clang of cannons being prepped. Xigbar had his operation down smoothly, and it took startlingly little time to blast back.

“The prize is prettier, eh?” Xigbar shouted among raucous laughter, and let the ropes catch the cannons’ recoil.

Ansem received word, then, of water leaking into their munitions and the Never Was's aim to weaken rather than destroy. Xemnas had grasped the power position he'd clambered for very quickly, even though they should have been outgunned.

They clearly knew what they were doing, for pirates, but that opened up strong possibilities.

The signal for a cease fire went up; a black flag, an offer to parley. Xigbar paused below deck when more cannon fire didn't come.

“Check with the Captain,” he instructed Luxord, who took off with more of a sway than he'd started with.

“That took little time,” Xemnas murmured to himself, amused, and turned with the full expectation that Luxord would be there. He was, mid-drink and eyes on the waving swath of black among Radiant Garden's colors. “Ceasefire. We will meet them.”

A black flag of their own went up, and both ships altered course, sailing to meet. There was no neutral ground they could share, another advantage Xemnas had tailored their meeting towards.

A bit of a show had to be put on, when it came time to weigh anchor; Zexion had produced a scattered, deliberately small number of nondescript ruffians to apparently help Lexaeus lift, but his concentration was nearly broken at the sight of the Admiral. He kept himself behind Vexen, but his visible eye widened as he nonetheless craned to get a better look.

Axel, perhaps, was the only one who was not surprised by the uncanny resemblance between the two ship commanders.

Ansem, himself, had been privately alarmed by the likeness for all the time it took for his eyes to land on Riku. They did not move, then, drinking in the sight of him. He was being very poorly shielded by Axel, eyes downcast, and made no attempt to meet his father’s gaze.

Unnoticed, Xemnas was appraising the Admiral with the same greedy eye he'd first fixed Riku with.
A plank lowered between the two ships, Ansem's crew following the instructions they'd been given only moments before they were in earshot of the pirate crew. The cannons were still manned, all guns at the ready and not one sailor left unarmed. He would not take chances or credit pirates with a sense of fair play.

“Am I correct in assuming that an Admiral of a distinguished Kingdom will respect the rules of a formal parley?” Xemnas called to him, in a manner almost snide.

Ansem's lip curled. “I will hear your terms, pirate, but I bow to no authority of yours.”

Startlingly identical, Xemnas sneered. “Then I humbly invite you aboard.”

At last, Ansem stopped staring at Riku long enough to give a cadre a curt nod, beckoning them to accompany him over. The pirates were severely outnumbered, but he would not dismiss them; Riku, for his recent faults and foolishness, was not weak. That he had fallen to the Never Was crew meant that they were dangerously capable, all rumors aside.

Riku's head was still bowed, almost a little blank. Axel, noticing that Ansem's gaze was once again upon him, stepped into his eye line with a challenging smirk. Ansem came to a stop, and each man behind him placed a hand on his hilt.

“Now, to our business...” Xemnas was not disturbed by the implicit threat. “If I'm not mistaken, you want the young Captain.”

“He belongs to the Royal Navy,” Ansem said coldly. “I presume you intend to sway me for some control of it.”

“No. There is only one thing I will trade for your son, and I am... assured that he is in your possession.”

It came as no surprise. “You want the boy.”

“Sora,” Xemnas confirmed.

It was no loss to Ansem. He turned to one of his officers, ordering, “Bring him.”

There was an instant in which the man looked like he might protest, mention the state of him. He thought better of it, saluting and acknowledging on his way back to the Hollow Bastion.

It was as he'd suspected, then; they'd been harboring a traitor, a clever little spy the pirates would be wanting back. Ansem could think of no other reason they might want him. Needling for confirmation – for it would be sweet, later, a hot swell of knowing among Riku's (and Kairi's) recovery – he observed, “I presume, then, the boy is something of value to you...”

“Undoubtedly less than your son is to you.” Xemnas spoke with a cruel sort of satisfaction, and Ansem's jaw clenched. He sought Riku again, probing for any sign of injury.

He had undeniably been mistreated, but was unharmed and composed. The same could not be said for Sora, and Axel's eyes glowed at the sight of him.

Supported against the officer's side, Sora's feet dragged as he was pulled along. His eyes were fogged, consciousness on the constant verge of retreat. The journey over the plank was slow, Sora's lack of balance making it quake under their feet.

The sailor greeted the Admiral formally, but could not salute. Sora's vision swam, seeing Ansem
before him and within his peripheral – but, that hardly mattered now.

There was Riku… maybe. He was almost certain he was seeing Riku. If only Sora weren't too shaky to speak, maybe he could make him look up - look at him.

But Riku's head was still down.

“Bring my son to me, and he is yours,” Ansem gestured to Sora, but Xemnas's expression had clouded, unimpressed.

“The boy is half-dead.”

“He has been taken ill,” Ansem dismissed. “He will recover.”

“I see,” Xemnas soured, and turned to Axel. “Hardly an even trade... Perhaps I ought to return the Captain in a state he will recover from.”

Axel's smirk spread.

“Was this not to be a formal parley?” Ansem shot at him coldly. “I will not be threatened.”

“Then it is fortunate you are not the one being threatened.” Xemnas turned towards him, gaze hard. “Bring the boy to my guard directly. As a show of good faith. You'll take your inept Captain, and we can consider our business concluded.”

Though his eyes narrowed, Ansem grabbed Sora's scruff carelessly, his other hand firmly on his sword hilt. Sora slumped to the deck, feet out from underneath him, but Ansem did not let that trip him up. His steps were slow, purposeful, and he watched Axel with a murderous glint in his eye. He thought the faint glow a trick of the light, and was far more focused on his hands, which were poised to do something.

Sora was dumped unceremoniously at his feet. He dropped heavily, and groaned, “Riku...?”

Riku only lifted his gaze a little, composure unbroken. He was still gagged, muffling any reply he could have given... but he did not even try to speak. He didn't seem to pay Sora any heed at all.

It might have hurt, if confusion wasn't prevailing among all else. Even the sickness, even the weakness. He was exhausted, sicker than he thought he'd ever been in his life, but he didn't feel delirious... Yet, all the same, he was doubting that Riku was even there. He didn't seem real. Nothing around him seemed real. Surely, the real Riku would never simply ignore Sora - even with his father watching, even under threat from pirates, Riku wouldn't turn away from him with something so obviously wrong.

Axel looked to his Captain, then reached around Riku's back. Whatever he did was finished in a trice, freeing his hands and then stepping aside to let Ansem by. He leaned to haul Sora to his feet, watching keenly.

“Come, Riku,” Ansem stepped right up towards him and beckoned, watching him gently rub a wrist. “My ship is ready to bring you home.”

Though he couldn't seem to bring himself to lift his eyes, or even undo the gag just yet, Riku's hand unwound from his wrist and outstretched his arms towards Ansem. At last, the Admiral's hand left his sword as he drew Riku into his arms.

There was nothing to grab. The illusion dissolved when touched, Riku dissipating in Ansem's arms.
and leaving him staggering forward with widening eyes.

The chakram formed in Axel's hands and was brought down against his skull just as Ansem turned, trying to proclaim, “A trick?”

There wasn't time to react, or resist. Ansem fell heavily forward, and lances struck through the bodies of two of the accompanying Naval officers.

The pandemonium on the Hollow Bastion was instantaneous. They were being fired upon, cannons blasting through the hull almost too fast to be believed. Luxord had gone, seemingly vanished in an instant, and the illusory pirates went with him. A chakram hit Ansem's second square in the chest and burst into flame, seemingly extinguished by a gust's full force before they carried like an explosion. The masts bent under the ferocious gale, and under all the noise – the yells, the collisions, the screech of wind – Demyx's tune carried, plucking strings and seeming totally relaxed.

The destruction all seemed to happen in seconds. Sora's mind slurred the images, going pale as he watched, too weak to help, or even cry out.

Kairi... Kairi was on that ship.

And it was being torn apart. There wasn't a possibility of survivors.

His eyes rolled back as his legs gave out from under him, collapsing into Axel's hold.

Demyx's tune began to change, the wind dying down and giving way to violent snaps and groans. The Hollow Bastion itself seemed to be trying to vocalize its pain as the water funneled beneath it, the maelstrom forming too quickly and dragging it into the crushing depths. The hull crumpled, imploded, collapsing down to the ocean floor.

Xemnas paid no heed to his will being done, the bodies still on his vessel now being efficiently unloaded over the side. He raked every inch of the Admiral with his eyes, highly critical. Every crease in his forehead, around his eyes and lips, looked twice as deep as they actually were – in truth, Ansem wasn't so very old, and younger than his current vessel by far.

It was still a shame. Ansem was adequate, but he would have much preferred Riku.

“Bind him and give him medical attention,” he commanded Lexaeus and Zexion. “He must be in fit condition.”

“Yes, of course. As for the boy... Fix him by any means necessary.”

Zexion snapped his book shut, theories already in their beginning stages regarding Sora's condition. “Sir.”

Demyx let go of his control over the water, which rocked the ship in the resulting surge. Xaldin laughed and pushed the final corpse over the rail, watching the waves pull it away from the threat of the rudder at a rapid rate, and called to Luxord about breaking out the bottles.

It nearly covered the sound of a muffled grunt and wet thump, hitting the deck. The attention of the crew had been captured nonetheless, all the gathered pirates turning to take in the sight of a small, soaking wet figure.

Kairi had grasped the rail, hoisted, and been thrown forward by the jarring motion. Hair and linen
underclothes dripping, she pushed herself up, standing as strong as she could with full awareness of the glowing eyes all now pinned on her.

“How tenacious,” Xemnas began to turn. “It seems we missed one…”

Her chest heaved with ragged breaths that she was trying to catch, jaw setting with determination. Clutching her side, her eyes darted from Ansem to Sora, and then to the assembled pirates.

Her body was trying to sag under the ache and exhaustion, her hands and bare feet screaming their pain into her mind. They’d been rubbed raw, torn open under the rough surface of the anchor’s chain, and a long rip had been made in the side of her dress to allow her the freedom to climb. The thin underdress was hardly enough to keep out the water’s chill, particularly now in the open air, but it weighed her down far less than the gown she’d abandoned fleeing the Hollow Bastion.

There hadn’t been time to plan when cannon fire ripped through the room keeping her prisoner, missing her by feet and showering the small space in near-lethal debris. She couldn’t raise a sword against such an attack, not to defend herself or anyone else. There could be no doubt in that moment of what she’d known all along - the Hollow Bastion would meet the same fate as the Highwind, and no human resistance could stop it.

She could make only one choice - to die trapped in the ship, or take her chances in the water. Namine was there, once again so close she could almost see her, almost hear her voice, and so was Riku. If Ansem was killed - if Sora was killed, or dead already, who would be left to fight for their rescue? Really, there had been no choice at all.

But the crew… Kairi had left them behind, defenseless. Doomed.

Axel watched her sharply, closing his eyes only when it was certain that no one cared to look his way, and sighed.

The likeness was unmistakable. Xemnas's eyes narrowed as he observed, “It appears we're in the presence of royalty. How unexpected.”

Shoulders rolling back, Kairi stood to her full, unimpressive height, and lowered both arms to her sides. She found her voice, and infused as much formality into it as she could while her fists were clenched and she was panting.

“I offer... myself... Crown princess... and heir... to the throne... of Radiant Garden... Protector... of the Destiny Island colonies... as your willing prisoner.” She thrust her wrists out in Xemnas's vague direction, looking anything but submissive in the gesture – she seemed both willing and prepared to maul the first person who might try to stop her.

A litany of curses streamed through Axel's head.

“... Do you?” Xemnas was beginning to look amused. “With no agenda, I'm sure.”

With a grasp of her lungs reestablished, Kairi was able to speak much clearer, unblinking. “I want nothing but my life in return. There is no more I have to negotiate with.”

“Fascinating,” Xemnas commented slowly, and looked to Vexen. “Get Saix. Have him bring the witch.”

With a muttered affirmative, Vexen flounced away. Xemnas considered Kairi, approaching her one measured step at a time.
“You realize, I expect, that you've become my prisoner by virtue of climbing aboard. Your life is not even yours to bargain with.”

Steeling herself was a now-familiar process. It wasn't his face alone that strongly reminded Kairi of Ansem; there was a familiar imperiousness, a similar darkness she wouldn't have been able to describe aloud. Practiced, she did not back down. “I hope only that you would see the value in sparing my life, and I will come quietly.”

“It's your poor fortune that there isn't enough left of your Kingdom to scrape a ransom from,” Xemnas mused. “However... There may yet be other uses for you...”

Kairi said nothing, ignoring the sting of Xemnas's barb, and waited to hear her fate. There were no more words exchanged between the two of them until they were joined on deck.

Kairi felt as though she'd been plunged back underwater.

Namine was frail, off-balance and listless with weakness. Both hands had been bound, simply for the purposes of being taken up to the Captain; Saix normally left them free, and in constant use, for any moment not spent drawing was a moment she'd be punished for. His hand fit around her skinny arm effortlessly, pulling her along without regard for her shaking legs.

Wide blue eyes found Kairi instantly, not a trace of surprise within them. Her hair was lank, skin paler than ever, but... her eyes hadn't changed. It was all Kairi could do not to let her legs buckle, or to cry out, or run to her.

“You have the witch very well in-hand,” Xemnas seemed to praise him. “Another little girl would not try you.”

Saix looked on the very verge of smiling, and the expression was not pleasant. “Indeed, such an unremarkable child would hardly be noticed at all.”

Kairi didn't hear them – did not even listen, anymore. Namine felt like she was vibrating on the inside, struggling to keep calm and convey something without a change in expression, and Kairi could feel it. All of her senses seemed peaked and prickling, awakened and overwhelmed just from being so near, and something was tugging at her. It wasn't distinct enough to read, but so present.

This close, Namine could feel the beat of Kairi's heart inside her own hollow chest. She was only just out of reach...

“She'll stay in your custody.”

Namine looked quickly up at Saix, eye contact broken.

“Very well, Captain,” Saix bowed his head, then raised a disdainful eyebrow at Kairi. “Should bonds be fetched for Her Highness?”

“Only the best for royalty,” Xemnas agreed snidely. Demyx had to be prompted into action with a faint snarl from Saix and a sharp instruction of, “Bonds, Demyx.”

“Oh – yes, Cap'n!” Demyx scrambled upright and dashed off. His attention had drifted, and he'd feel the lash for it later.

Saix's scowl evaporated when his eyes fixed on Kairi once more, and she began to tremble when he smirked. It was at least in part due to the chill of her wet clothes, but the threat was not subtle. She wasn't sure she understood what sort of guard she was being put under, but... if nothing else, she was
starting to hope that she'd be kept together with Namine.

“I'm afraid our accommodations will be lacking, in comparison to your usual fare.” Almost casually, Xemnas grabbed her by the hair to drag towards Saix. Kairi yelped, caught completely off guard, and Saix's grip on Namine tightened when she twitched. “We will, of course, do our best to treat royalty as you deserve.”

Kairi whimpered and shut her eyes against the sting. Demyx's footsteps beat a hasty path to them.

“Do be careful with our guest,” Saix sneered. Her wrists were seized, cold metal clamping around them.

“We have gotten crowded, haven't we,” Xemnas murmured, narrow gaze traveling from Kairi to Sora – being dragged off to the brig, in Axel's arms – and Ansem, entire torso being bound in heavy rope.

“Surely our spare prisoner can make room for another?”

“We'll throw the boy in with the Captain. I would not like to give someone the opportunity to tamper with the Admiral...”

Saix nodded. “And will we trust Axel to ensure there's no interference from the brother?”

“He appears to have Roxas under control.”

Kairi, very still as her cuffs were tightened and locked, listened close and started to make sense of it. A 'spare prisoner' – that could be no one else but Riku, but how and why had they taken him? He'd lost relevance to the pirates, somehow... Relevance that Ansem seemed to have, instead, if Xemnas wouldn't risk him being 'tampered with'.

A nauseating way of referring to anyone, even the Admiral. He spoke as though Ansem was some thing, and not a person.

“I will make sure he understands what's at risk, should he fail to do so.”

“Very good,” Xemnas nodded curtly, and dismissed Demyx with a motion of the hand. Kairi's cuffs were secure, and no one thought she would need anything more to be subdued. “Take them away.”

“Yes, Captain.” Saix snatched Kairi by the shoulder and ushered her forcibly forward. “You, girl. You will walk ahead, and know what will happen if you do anything foolish.”

With a nod, Kairi kept her eyes on Namine for as long as she could before she had to turn her back. The hair on her neck stood on end, not liking the slightly feral feel of her new jailer, and pressingly aware of Namine.

Their procession was almost silent, with Saix only growling occasional directions and keeping his own eyes on Namine. He hardly expected her to have the same sort of power as Roxas, but he was nonetheless suspicious.

She didn't seem any less listless. If Kairi held some aspect of her power, there was no indication just yet.

“Halt, there.” He pushed ahead of Kairi to unlock his chamber door, putting them almost close enough to touch if only their arms were free. Namine dared to give her the smallest smile, a little sad, while Saix's back was turned. There wasn't time to return it, the door opening and jerking Kairi's
head forward before she could be caught looking.

Roxas was present no longer. Namine automatically went to the corner Saix kept her in, needing no instruction, and pressed her back to the wall. The two of them had been in here, unable to exchange words, for hours... and as sure as she’d felt Kairi, he must have felt Sora.

She worried for him. Wondered what he'd do.

Namine kept still as Kairi was herded violently into the corner across from her. She held her hands aloft, her manacles undone a moment later. Sinking to the floor, she picked up her paper and held it to her chest promptly.

“Yours stay on,” Saix informed Kairi coldly, “and I will inspect them for any tampering when I return.”

There was no better opportunity to speak with Axel and relay Xemnas's commands. Even if Namine was effected in any way by Kairi's presence, she would not recover from her malnutrition and exhaustion quickly enough to take drastic action. They were in the middle of the sea, nothing around to swim to... And he would find them, if they somehow managed escape.

Kairi gently folded her legs under her, sitting carefully and trying not to cringe at the damp. Namine held still, barely able to look at her until the door closed, and the lock turned.

At last, she dared to lift her head, voice shaky as her papers slipped out of her grasp. “You're here...”

“Namine...” Kairi's heart fluttered, tears finally allowed to well up. Her voice was feeble but sweet. “My Namine... What have they done to you...?”

She'd begun to crawl forward, but Namine made it to her first. She lurched against her, arms winding around Kairi and burying her face into her shoulder with a soft sound like a sob – she was not crying, could not, but Kairi did it for her.

She tucked her face into Namine's neck and let the tears fall, shoulders trembling. “I was so afraid you were gone forever...”

Namine just shook her head. Kairi dropped a gentle kiss against her hair, tears mingling with the strands.

“...Thank you for coming for me...” Namine whispered, at last.

“I couldn't stand it, anymore. After they took Riku, too... I had to.”

“It will be alright.” Namine hugged her tighter. “Because you came for me... I can make things right...”

Soft and shaky as her voice was, there was a confidence in those words that sounded almost eerie. As though Namine was making a prediction.

Kairi lifted her head. “You can...?”

“I promise,” she nodded, still buried against Kairi's shoulder. “I'll rescue you from this place.”

A little breath escaped, resembling a laugh just enough to curve Kairi's lips. “That's what I'm supposed to be doing.”

Namine lifted her head at last, and kissed her. Her lips were dry but soft, still Namine, and Kairi held
onto it for as long as possible.

“... We'll save each other,” Namine promised, chalky hands resting briefly against Kairi’s arms. “And everyone...”

As much as she wanted to kiss her again, or simply accept those words, danger still pressed at Kairi and reminded her why 'everyone' may not be such a wise goal. “... I have to warn you about Ansem.”

“What is it...?”

“He's-...” Kairi stopped short of calling him a monster, and reevaluated what she wanted to say. “Something's wrong. He's obsessed with getting Riku back, wouldn't hear a word from me or-... Oh, I don't know if you knew Sora...”

“I know Roxas...” Namine hesitated, went quieter. “And I know Ansem won't survive much longer.”

Her eyes widened. “How? Was it...?” Kairi's gaze strayed to the drawings.

“The Captain... Xemnas was after him. He needs Ansem for...” Namine trailed off, fingers curling and shaking her head. “It's not important. I can explain everything later.”

Kairi's heart wrenched, aggrieved with the choice before her. All that had taken place on the Hollow Bastion would put things into perspective, but she didn't know how much more time they had in privacy. There was no point in hiding anything from Namine, though – moreover, she didn't want to.

She wanted to say what she felt. She wanted Namine to understand.

She prayed Namine wouldn't think her terrible for confessing softly, “It's horrible, but... I don't mind if that happens.”

For a moment, Namine was about to reply, but her jaw clicked shut and she gave a quick shake of her head. Then she was kissing her again, craving as much of this as she could have before Saix returned, and Kairi was weakened by a need just as strong.

By the time they parted, Namine's eyes stung. She was shaky in drawing away, desperately not wanting to.

“... We'll talk about everything... when we have time.”

Kairi nodded, teeth chattering together as she looked to the closed door. “Is he here often?”

Namine shook her head. “... He might be here more often, to keep an eye on you...”

That information relaxed her anyway, though she was still shivering with cold. These quarters were dusty with lack of care, damp and cold, and her underclothes hadn't dried yet. It was no wonder this room was so miserable, if Saix wasn't often around... They wouldn't waste warm lamps on a prisoner.

She'd been considering trying again to explain all that'd happened, but found her eyes filling with tears once more. Namine's had spilled over, and Kairi wished she could wipe them away.
“I still can't believe I'm really seeing you again...” Kairi lifted her chained hands, anyway, brushing her cheek.

It had been so long since Namine had cried that she didn't quite remember how. Her breathing shuddered, getting caught in her chest on its way out and bursting forth in little hiccups. Her tears were barely a trickle, but they felt like a waterfall, hot and unpleasant down dirty cheeks.

“I thought...” she inhaled shallowly. “So many times... I thought we wouldn't...”

Kairi blinked in rapid succession, clearing her eyes. “You look starved... And your legs...”

“They'll heal,” Namine glanced down at the raw marks around her ankles, her old chains having rubbed permanent red marks into them.

Valiantly, Kairi tried to believe her. “When we get home... I'm going to make sure you get double portions of every meal. Triple, for desserts.”

Namine was surprised to hear herself laugh, so startled that she interrupted herself with a hiccup. Kairi's heart warmed.

“I've waited so long to hear you laugh...”

There wasn't enough color in Namine to bring a proper flush to her cheeks. She gently rested a hand over Kairi's, hoping that the simple action might convey how badly she'd been needing her, and Kairi took it.

It may have been her imagination, but she thought she felt something powerful pass between them, like some invisible energy. Namine's cheeks managed to go the faintest pink, and she squeezed.

“... I can't make what happened to you better... but I can promise things will be better now,” Kairi murmured, relieved to see the slight color in her complexion.

“No yet,” Namine said cryptically, “but soon.”

“Soon,” Kairi echoed. She didn't know whatever Namine knew, but she trusted that she was right. She always could.

Namine's lips brushed over Kairi's once more before she began to shrink back. “I should... I need to draw...”

Her hands were stiff and sore, but she was never allowed to make excuses. She'd need to sketch quickly, if she was to make Saix believe she'd been at work the entire time.

Saix's cruelty was of a different breed than Marluxia's. He didn't show the same sadistic fascination with breaking down her spirit, but he clearly expected her to be broken already. She wasn't bound, and he allowed her a small light to see by - both of these mercies allowed on the condition she would draw until it ran her coal down to nothing.

She was often alone, as she'd been with Marluxia, but Saix's visits weren't marked by taunting words or barbed touches. Saix rarely spoke to Namine at all when in the same room, giving her the same cursory acknowledgement as he might give the furniture. He made quite certain that she knew she was only a tool, one that could be instantly disposed of if she failed to fulfill her purpose. Saix's presence made her pressingly aware of how small she was, how frail her bones were, how easily her neck could snap under his hands. Now and then, she could almost feel the longing in him to do just that.
Still, she would never be tormented by that monstrous puppet Kairi again, apart from in dreams...

“May I watch?” Kairi followed, arranging herself to sit cross-legged. She imagined Saix would be displeased to see them near to one another, but truthfully, she feared that one or both of them might freeze without the other’s body heat. Namine started to smile again as she took up paper and drawing coal.

“Of course.”

Nestling closer, Kairi leaned her cheek on the back of Namine’s shoulder and watched her create the first few sweeping lines. “I’ve missed this, too,” she told her softly.

“It’s almost like the old days... When we’d sit by the fire and you’d watch me draw...” Her aches weren’t so bad, with Kairi near.

“I’d be happy to watch you draw anywhere,” Kairi shivered, “though I’d like a fire now...”

“It helps, sometimes, to imagine one.”

The drawing already began to take shape; two similar forms, an extension from their entwined arms jagged with the teeth of a key. Kairi watched her work, watched the faces be filled in with identical detail, with frantic intensity.

Her joy and Namine’s kisses had suspended their situation, however briefly, but it came eking back with Namine’s words and her pace. When they’d been children, she’d always taken such care with her drawings, such passion... and now her life depended on it, and it showed.

Kairi tried to picture the fire, nonetheless. Sky-high smoke came to mind, instead.

The tending-to Sora had been given was rough. Zexion had only been given time for a cursory look-over and the most basic of treatment, while Saix consulted with Axel over what was to be done with him. Roxas was, of course, the concern; he’d been shoved out of confinement and all but ordered back to Axel’s room, which was almost certainly where he would have gone anyway. Sora was to be housed with Riku, and it occurred to him then that Xemnas could not have been aware of the relationship between the two. If he were, he wouldn't have put them together; it was a small mercy, but Xemnas never showed even that.

Axel did not say so to Saix. He merely took his instructions and carried Sora away, down to the brig. It was difficult to carry the dead weight of him in his arms, though he was slipping in and out of consciousness – an improvement from before, as he'd seemed barely aware even when his eyes were open.

Passing the cell holding Ansem, who also had yet to rouse, he casually announced, “Look alive, Captain. You're getting a cell mate.”

For days, Riku had not been given enough food to get by nor enough peace for sleep. Without open air or light, the rocking of the ship had become an enemy, counting out every sway like a second that went on too long. He’d been tormented by anxiety, by anguish, by the repetitive realizations sinking in again and again just when he thought he’d finally come to terms with them. His hands, at least, were no longer bound. Bars were enough. Sickness and self-disgust were enough.
He lifted his head when he was addressed, and lurched upwards from his huddle on the floor. “Sora.”

Breathing shaky, Sora's eyelids fluttered as recognition pulled urgently at him. He turned his head and groaned softly, drawing Riku to the bars in an instant.

“What happened to him? What have you done?” Riku demanded, staring.

“He was already in this condition. Get away, it'd be a shame if you escaped and we had to kill you…”

He eased Sora down, where he slipped limply to the floor. Unthinkingly, Riku sank to his knees, not able to look away. The expression on his face, more wan and gaunt than it should be... He was strongly reminded of their first meeting and all the time spent in sick bay, when he'd been clinging to life.

Though he hadn't obeyed, Axel unlocked the cell door anyway. He had a feeling Riku wouldn't try to leave.

Riku got back to his feet when Sora was lifted off the ground, gravitating towards him and all but taking Sora away from Axel as he was gingerly placed against the wall. “He's cold…”

Blinking as he changed hands, Sora struggled to get a grasp in alertness, mumbling, “Riku…”

There was a vacancy to his voice, like he didn't actually have any idea that Riku was there. Still, both hands cupped Sora's face, swallowing hard.

“Sora... I'm here.”

Drifting back, Axel swung the keys around and swaggered out to lock the cell door. Neither occupant noticed, or cared. Dull blue eyes struggled to open, brow furrowed, and Riku's heart pounded all the way up in his throat.

“... You're the strongest person I know... Whatever's happened to you, you can recover from it…”

Sora's confusion was palpable. “You were outside... Ansem was... You didn't see me…”

He wondered if that was a dream. Or, perhaps, this was the dream? Riku's hands weren't warm, but they were, they warmed the cold, clammy skin of his cheeks. There was sweat on his neck, but those hands were dry. Were they real? Was any of this...?

“I've been locked up in here for days...” Riku informed him, but didn't doubt that Sora had seen him. He didn't believe there was anything the pirates weren't capable of, anymore.

“I was in a cell... and then...” Sora groaned. “I don't know…”

As strong as he could make himself be, Riku drew him into his arms to warm him and muttered, “Are you in pain?”

“Was burning... Just tired now.” Rolling into Riku's chest, he blinked again and made a languid attempt at raising his head. “Where's Kairi?”

The question could only be a form of torture, chilling Riku like ice crystallizing his blood. “I'm a prisoner,” he explained quietly. “I wouldn't know... I didn't know for sure that the two of you were still alive…”
He wished he could feel some manner of relief, that Kairi survived the siege on the Highwind... but there was a chance her life had only lasted until now, instead, and he couldn't be sure the few extra weeks were worthwhile.

“Have to tell her I'm sorry,” Sora bemoaned, sounding all the more distressed. “Got her dress all wet... and made her cry...” He brought his hands up to his face, muffling a groan.

“She'll forgive you... I'm sure she's already forgiven you...” Riku didn't understand, but tried to reassure him anyway.

“What do I tell Riku?” Sora whimpered deliriously. “I promised...”

“... It's alright, Sora,” he consoled, bringing him closer to his chest. “You protected her. Thank you.”

Sora rested on him heavily, little tremors contained by Riku's arms, until he seemed to come into awareness with a jolt. “Riku-!”

“Yes,” he breathed, not daring to hope he'd recovered. It was naive, to even wish it.

Eyes opening wide, they weren't focused enough to meet Riku's as he sat up, only a little.

“He knows.”

Riku only needed a moment to understand, but it must have seemed longer. He knew he should be afraid of the repercussions and implications, but instead he just felt... numb.

He understood. “Ansem did this to you.”

The alert tension had faded and Sora babbled again. “The wine... it was your wine, just like-... I remembered, and I think he knew...”

“... It doesn't matter now.”

Ansem had done this to him, and the numbness had faded. Sharp hate bit into it, eating at him and his fear, and the first time he really wanted to believe. He'd stopped arguing with himself and determined that Ansem wasn't his father – couldn't be – but this was the first time he was glad for it. He hated him; he couldn't remember hating anyone more, and he wanted no more connection to him than a stranger ten Kingdoms away.

“Kairi... she's still there...” Sora groaned again, sounding angry with himself. “I left Kairi...”

“We'll get her back. We'll save them all,” Riku lied, not believing they could. “Sora, just... Just recover. I can't lose you...”

His eyes closed, exhausted. “I hope this isn't a dream...”

“It isn't...” Fighting his desire to squeeze him tight, Riku settled for resting his cheek against Sora's forehead. “I love you. I didn't tell you, enough.”

Sora hummed gently, Riku pleasantly warm against him. In that moment, it was like they were merely snuggling in bed together, affectionate and together with nothing to dread.

“Love you...” Sora murmured easily, like it was common knowledge. It felt like Riku's heart had just been compressed, then as if it was floating away from him. He shook, but only a little. Not enough to disturb the boy in his arms.
“... I'm sorry for everything, I love you so much...”

“You're here,” was the vague response.

“I won't leave you again...”

“Then no apologies...” Sora mumbled. Riku silenced, wanting to apologize again and again, but settled for smoothing his hair back.

It was distantly pleasant to Sora, among all the disorienting things fading in and out. He was too tired to remember all the urgent questions in the back of his mind, or even to register the lightened feeling of Roxas close by for what it was. His memories overlapped hazily with his consciousness, throwing reality into uncertainty.

But Riku's hand was warm, and the stroking of his hair was nice.

After a minute, Riku told him, “Sleep, if you need to. I'll be here.”

“I hope you will be...” Sora hoped saying so would make it true.

Riku kissed his temple, lulling him to sleep and never letting him go. Only then did he remember that Ansem was now on board the Never Was, a prisoner in the position Riku had found himself in, and any hope he had of rest was robbed from him.

It was just as well. When Ansem roused on the other side of the wooden wall, Riku was still carding his fingers through Sora's hair, maintaining his fragile peace.

Presumably, it was morning when the guard changed, and Riku still had not slept. The intentions of the two descending figures were different, however, as were the orders they were under. Accompanied by Lexaeus, Zexion strode past Ansem's cell on his way to the one being shared, and Riku unwound from Sora the moment it seemed the footsteps were doing anything more than pacing.

He didn't want to give away their closeness to the pirates. Whoever the guard had been in the night, they had showed no interest in doing more than lounging out of sight, the occasional sizzle and pop of fire a cruel tease in the cold of the night. Riku stood, facing the two at the cell door.

Zexion came to a halt and passed over Riku entirely, fixing his eyes on Sora. He was in one of his periods of shivering, feeling a chill Riku couldn't deep under his skin, but he hadn't protested when Riku moved. He was hardly able to.

The lock clinked and keys jangled, held in Lexaeus's free hand. In the other was a plain bag.

“Have you come to fix him?” Riku's voice was a little raspy from exhaustion, the first words he'd spoken since Sora had first drifted off.

“If he can be 'fixed',” Zexion replied neutrally. He remained several steps back from the cell, awaiting Lexaeus's evaluation; he would have much preferred to do this outside of a cell, but Xemnas had forbidden it. To prevent reckless action from Roxas or any other foolishness, he was forced to make do with conditions he'd call distasteful at best. “He needs to be inspected first to find what put him in this state...”
Lexaeus said not a word as he entered the cell, throwing Riku a speculative look to see if he would make a grab for the keys or dash for the door. When he did not, he progressed and knelt by Sora, opening the bag. A blurry approximation of Lexaeus's face came into Sora's watery view, and he gave the weakest jerk to get away.

“... And if he can't be helped?” Tense at the thought, Riku's fists clenched.

“That would be unfortunate. He's needed alive for at least a short time.”

His eyes narrowed, but Riku hadn't expected anything else from the Never Was crew. At the very least, Lexaeus was gentle in his inspection, but that didn't allay Sora's fears. He could remember being held by the hulking man and the violence he was capable of, but was too dizzy to sit up or fight. His head turned, seeking Riku in his distress.

Carefully, Riku approached, badly wanting to comfort him. Lexaeus lifted Sora's hand and pricked a finger, eliciting the quietest gasp. Blood beaded from the tiny puncture for Lexaeus to examine, and although Sora was rattled... oddly, he wasn't so afraid. He was starting to understand that Lexaeus wasn't attacking him.

Riku was not so sure, and bristled as though contemplating attack.

Lexaeus paid no heed to either. “The blood is weak.”

“Hm...” Zexion's visible eye flicked to Riku. “What behaviors have you observed in him?”

“... He's cold. He shakes... Fades in and out.”

“Has there been fever? Has he been ill?” Zexion pressed.

“I can't tell... I think he might have been feverish, but he hasn't been sick,” Riku looked down uncertainly. He felt patently useless.

With another sound of consideration, Zexion impatiently prodded, “Lexaeus?”

“Poison, undoubtedly. Not deadly... More likely an herb or tonic to induce illness.”

“Yes, a more direct poison would certainly have killed him by now,” he agreed.

Lexaeus swabbed the bleeding finger and began putting away his tools. “He requires his entire system flushed. His care was obviously started on the Hollow Bastion, but inadequately.”

“I suppose the Captain also wants that done without removing him from the cell,” Zexion said dryly.

“Roxas could be contained,” Lexaeus closed the bag. “There is little point in attempting to cure him here, and his blood would be ideal for a minor transfusion.”

Sora stirred a little, at the mention of his brother.

“I have a theory as to what he could be been exposed to,” Zexion challenged. “I'd be interested to know if you arrived at the same conclusion.”

“Dark Thorn,” Lexaeus replied without hesitation. “Native to Radiant Garden and more likely to be found on an Admiral's ship than lethal poison.”

“As I suspected, then,” Zexion agreed evenly, drumming his fingers on his arm. “Famous enemy to travels, though the sickness rarely lingers in humans. Undoubtedly kept to control the population of
vermin. I suppose a concentrated enough dose could be deadly without treatment... Although, that
could hardly be ingested accidentally."

He seemed the faintest bit entertained by the unspoken conclusion. Riku had kept silent all the while,
horrified, their conversation strangely muted to his ears as though he were listening through a thick
wall. Acid crept up his throat and was swallowed back down.

“... Now that you know what's happened, you can make him well,” he regarded Zexion coldly.
“Xemnas needs him, he'll let you take him somewhere better than a cell.”

He could cope with being separated. Anything, to see Sora recover.

“You presume a great deal.” Zexion turned away as Lexaeus locked the cell again, not elaborating,
and the pair of them walked away.

“Without Sora, he'll fail again,” Riku snapped at his wake. “He will make him well.”

No response came. He sank next to Sora again, seething even as he embraced him.

Sora was holding his bleeding finger, pliant. “What did they mean...?”

“... My f-...” Riku began, then corrected himself darkly. “Ansem did this to you. That's what they
meant.”

It took disturbingly little to accept that as truth. “He wanted me executed... He said I would be...
Kept me locked up. But Kairi... made him let me out...”

Some of his ire faded when he thought of Kairi and Sora on the Hollow Bastion, replaced by guilt...
but only for a moment, as a terrible thought flashed through his mind. Urgently, unthinkingly, he
demanded, “Did he do anything else to you? Did he touch you?”

Unprepared, Sora blinked, the question out of nowhere so far as he could tell. “No... he'd barely
come near me. He got other people to escort me everywhere...”

… Of course. Riku swallowed his fear, feeling foolish for asking. Of course... Ansem would not
have touched Sora; that was reserved for Riku, only Riku. There was a reflexive clench from his
stomach, but he doggedly pressed past the sick feeling.

“How did he do this?”

“I don't know... It must have been at dinner. He only let me out once...”

“... He could have killed you...”

“He wanted me gone... before I could find you again.” Sora hated the thought, suddenly clinging
onto Riku with all the strength he had. “You know, don't you? I'm not a pirate... not a spy...”

“Of course you're not,” Riku wrapped his arms around him tightly. “You're my Sora...”

Relieved, Sora wilted, warmed. “You saved me... I could never...”

“You saved me, too,” he admitted, very quiet.

“Huh?” Fantasy images sprang to mind – leaping between Riku and the end of a sword, snatching
his hand before he could fall into brackish depths – but those things hadn't happened, and he couldn't
place the event being referred to. “I don't remember...”
“I would have given up, long ago, if it weren't for you.”

A little swell of flattery bubbled in his chest, but Sora didn't want to think about the ‘if’. “I don't think you would have.”

“I know differently,” Riku exhaled, and sought to meet his eyes. “Whatever happens-...”

It took Sora some time to focus, but he managed as well as he could. Riku looked at him, imposing the image in his head over what he was seeing; Sora's rosy cheeks and broad smile, clear eyes and lively glow.

“... Whatever happens, I'm so glad I met you.”

A smile did manage to play across Sora's lips. “I'm glad, too... But you don't have to say it like this is goodbye.”

Riku said nothing, not convinced it wasn't exactly that, and kissed him almost too softly to feel. If Sora was taken from him now, this was what he wanted them both to remember.

Having listened to every word, Ansem mulled over cold disdain with only possessive, violent visions to keep him warm.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

We're nearly there, everyone. Pretty soon we won't have to write these exhausting action scenes anymore!

They'd hit Oblivion's shore barely an hour ago, but Xemnas had not left immediately. There'd been measures he wished to take, no doubt ensuring that his return would not be met with another rebellion. The main purveyors of dissent may have been disposed of, but there was still one large risk he was taking.

Xemnas would not leave anything to chance, this time. He made no secret of that.

Namine was being taken along. Saix's hands were full enough, handling Ansem, but they openly relied on the sense of self-preservation that had long been beaten into her. To run was to commit suicide, and now that they had Kairi in their clutches, that was undesirable. Roxas might have also been a flight risk, if it weren't for Sora; although his condition had improved, he still could hardly walk on his own. He was much too weak to run.

As they departed, a short chain bound Sora and Ansem together at the wrist, leaving Roxas the choice to give up his freedom to support his brother’s laboured steps, or watch him be dragged behind.

All had been taken into account. Axel was the only thorn in the Captain’s side, for no matter what trust he'd managed to garner, he was still unpredictable. Xemnas hadn't told him so, but he hadn't survived for so long without being to predict him.

He lounged in his room as the Captain took off with his company of captives, eyes closed and utterly relaxed. He'd assumed such posture the moment the ship's hull had met beach, and scarcely moved the entire time. Even a sharp-eyed observer might conclude he was napping, and Axel doubted he'd have been left under casual watch.

It took only a little time, wracking his brain, but he was certain he knew who was spying on him and what to do about it.

And he had to work his charms fast, because he didn't know for sure how far Xemnas had gotten or when the trail could go cold.

“So,” he drawled and cracked open an eye, voice thick with lethargy, “how much longer do you think you can stand watching me do nothing?”

As anticipated, there was an irate little growl from a dark corner of his room, coming out as more of a sigh. Xigbar had been observing with decreasing attentiveness as Axel did nothing but lie about, and the break in monotony meant he wasn't particularly devastated to be caught. Phasing out of the shadows from the ceiling, he declared, “Got to keep you out of trouble. Boss's orders.”

“Raising hell sounds exhausting. Not to mention unoriginal.”

As though he couldn't care less, Xigbar only shrugged. “Can't risk you pulling another stupid stunt.
No telling who you're turning on next.”

Axel laughed and closed his eyes again. “You sure you aren't just here because you like your boys wild?”

“Wouldn't just be hangin' up here if I was after wild,” he snorted.

“I'm too much for you, anyway.” Axel stretched and turned over onto his side, eyes still closed. “Did you know they have Demyx guarding the princess?”

He'd ensured that he would be, when Axel offered to guard Saix's door, himself. As he'd pointed out, most of the crew would have more important tasks to perform, and a dainty high-bred girl would be a waste of anyone else's time. Obviously assuming exactly that, Xigbar smirked.

“They don't think she's any threat, do they?”

“I think if they did, they wouldn't have put Demyx in front of the door.”

“Ain't that right...” Xigbar's one good eye slid thoughtfully towards Axel's door.

The seed had been planted, and Axel waited a moment to let the idea sprout naturally in Xigbar's head. He opened one eye again, teasing with a sneer, “If you want to steal Demyx away, I'm sure I can manage the ten minutes you two will take. I'm not doing anything either way.”

Xigbar's lip curled at the accusation, that last bit of goading turning out to be all the push Axel needed.

“I'm giving Xaldin the head's up,” he warned, but seized the suggestion exactly as expected. He vanished into the darkness, leaving an expectant quiet behind.

As much as Axel doubted that he would follow through on the threat, he waited a few moments to see whether or not Xaldin would show up. If Xigbar actually stopped to tell Xaldin what he was doing, he'd be giving the other man an opportunity to get to Demyx first – no, he hadn't told. Axel was clear.

He sprang into action. Axel pulled on his boots and pried a carefully-insulated pack from his trunk, trinkets caving in around the spot he'd reserved for his new, and most valuable prize. With an air of nonchalance, he slid out of his quarters and bustled down the narrow passage to Saix's door.

There was no one to stop him. Including, most distinctly, Demyx. Two birds with one stone – this would be quick and easy, but Axel had expected that much. The harder part of the journey was to come.

One of Roxas's picks was removed from the pack, and Axel deftly began working at the lock.

The rattling noise froze Kairi where she crouched. Wary, she held still and stared at the closed door, one hand caught in her shackles at the widest point. It'd become clear very quickly that her guard wasn't interested in watching more than the door, and in the time she had unmonitored, she'd twisted and strained her hand trying to free it. She was still in the thin underclothes she'd come on board wearing, cold and stiff from being forced to huddle in a corner all night and day – there was a poor chance of escaping, even poorer of fighting anyone off if she was found, but she couldn't resign herself to this fate.

If someone came in now, there was no explaining away what she'd been trying to do. Kairi's heart leapt to her throat, hammering a bruise into her windpipe.
The door swung open, just barely. Axel slipped inside, and met her stare.

She didn't even attempt to hide her wrists. He glanced down at the cuffs, then held up the pick.

“Want help?”

Her fear turned to caution, watching him without blinking as she hissed back, “… Why would you do a thing like that?”

The door barely clicked, when it was shut. Axel closed it softly, with one last glance over all he could see, and lowered his voice so as to threaten without being indiscreet.

“I don't have time for a lot of conversation, so here's what's happening – I'm kidnapping you to tail Roxas and the Captain, because I'm assuming you sense Namine the way he senses Sora.”

Kairi regarded him. She was taking it alarmingly well.

“You're not kidnapping me,” she declared.

“... You don't actually get a say in that, Princess. That's the idea behind a kidnapping.”

With only a little stagger, Kairi pushed herself to her feet. “You will free my hands and take me to Riku. Then we'll go with you.” She raised her chin, lofty with dignity, though it was necessary in order to look Axel in the eye. “You're right. I can sense Namine.”

Axel just raised an eyebrow. Out of everything he'd tried to factor in, he hadn't accounted for... this. He'd had a variety of threats worked out to keep her in line, but if she was a willing participant...

Well. All the better.

He swept towards her, setting about freeing her hands. “We don't need Riku.”

“You need me to have Riku,” she claimed, perfectly steady even in the face of a burning, irritated glower.

Axel had shown a little too much of his hand, revealing that his plan hinged on Kairi’s ability, but he hadn’t bargained on her catching on this early. This went nowhere without her, and because she knew it, Kairi was in the position to make demands now.

Ultimately, he could have forced answers out of her, but there really wasn’t time for that. It meant going out of his way, delaying this already tenuous scheme even further… but Axel would rather have her cooperative.

“Okay. He's safe in the brig, at the moment. Do you have a plan to get him out?”

Admittedly, she had no idea what she was up against in that regard. She hadn't reached that stage in her own planning. “… You broke me out.”

“Yes, and I planned that in advance.” Axel jerked the pick a little, and the lock snapped open. He let it fall, regarding her as his mind raced to keep up.

Things would be easier, with Kairi joining him as an accomplice instead of hostage. If it took Riku to keep her complacent, it could be worthwhile – it'd shave down the amount of time he thought he'd need to spend wrangling her, though that was time he had to devote to a rescue instead.

Only the trio that lurked in the hull's depths were ever considered for guarding the brig, anymore.
The others had shown too much interest, and Xemnas hadn't wanted to risk either Ansem or Sora wriggling their way to freedom while Riku 'entertained' the offending sailor. Lexaeus was needed when they were coming ashore, and undoubtedly had other tasks to perform... Which meant either Zexion or Vexen would be the obstacle.

Axel could handle either one. Even kill, if it came to it, but he didn't think it would.

When it came to killing Saix or Xemnas, though... maybe there was something to it, having a second fighter as back-up.

Irritably, he sighed. “We could use another sword arm.”

Kairi rubbed her sore wrists, and spoke with false confidence. “I can use a sword.”

“As well as your Captain?”

“... No.” She went faintly pink. Axel rolled his eyes.

“Come on. Keep close, and quiet.”

Kairi was honestly surprised that she wouldn't have to fight for her way, and might've anticipated being tricked or outright lied to by someone else. She sensed that Axel had no intention of it, though, perhaps not thinking it was worth the time he'd have to spend arguing.

She nodded, and made to follow. “Will you give me a weapon?”

“Weapons are on the way.”

“... Very well, after you.”

The pick was put away, and Kairi hovered close as Axel checked whether or not the coast was clear. She could easily obscure her entire body behind him, if she needed to, and practice kept her light on her feet. Never had Axel been more glad for sparse numbers, though, as the journey over to the brig was unimpeded, even when he could hear others not so far away.

They were cutting through the armory – barely equipped at all, to Kairi's eye, for she'd seen plenty of the Highwind's and Hollow Bastion's. She sank close to the wall and eyed the swords Axel was pulling out with care, a touch nervous. These were not the fine, polished steel she'd practiced with, but wider, heavier blades that were beginning to show signs of age apparent even to her untrained eye.

He held one of them out to her, along with a sword belt. She tried to calm her heart, and took them without any show of hesitation.

“Here's the plan,” Axel murmured, very hushed as he swung the sword point-down, and Kairi struggled to clasp the leather above her hips. “I'm going to be the distraction. While I take the guard out of the picture, you grab the keys and get Riku out.”

Kairi nodded stiffly, eyes determinedly narrowed. Her gait was twice as fast to keep up with Axel's swiftness, his mind on time and her body half-laden with new weight on one side. Only once did he give her an impatient look for falling behind, and she only refrained from speaking out in her own defense because she knew it was better to be quiet.

They neared the brig and Axel looked around a curve, taking a look down the steps towards the cells. A smirk began to spread over his face.
Vexen was taking meticulous notes by lamplight, his eyes flickering towards Riku enough to make anyone think he was observing him. Why he would bother was unclear, as Riku was doing nothing more than sit against the wall with a severe look upon his face.

Axel spoke up as he rounded and descended, disconcertingly casual. “I think the whole idea behind putting you on watch duty was your lack of interest. Don't tell me that's changed?”

Vexen almost knocked over his chair in his haste to rise. Kairi peeked round, and her small gasp was covered by the clatter.

She hadn't laid eyes on Riku since his capture, and she'd never seen him look worse. There was a sallow look to his skin, hair a little lank and eyes deeply shadowed. Still, he was in one piece, alive, and she wanted to call out to him. Break him free and squeeze him, just to make sure he was still real.

“You are supposed to be under supervision!” Vexen spat. “No one believes you're through with your treachery!”

Axel advanced easily down the steps, speaking as though Vexen hadn't. “Don't tell me... With Marluxia gone, and Zexion still not interested... You're looking for a quick and efficient way to fill that void?”

“Where is Xigbar?!”

“You're changing the subject.”

Flames burst from his free palm, held aloft, and Kairi had to cover her mouth quickly. She watched Axel advance on the other pirate in horror, while Vexen sputtered over his attempt at a hiss.

“You've shaken him off your trail. It couldn't be clearer you're up to something!”

“And you're going to bravely stop me,” Axel challenged. From within the cell, Riku stood, jaw set and eyes – like everyone else's – drawn to the fire.

Vexen was frozen to the spot. He hadn't recovered, yet, from their fight, and could still feel flame bursting from his back. Kairi, likewise, could not make herself move for a lingering second and breathed shallowly, the image of her burning Kingdom stamping her thoughts down.

“No minute now, I'll be seeing that backbone,” Axel taunted, walking ever closer.

A shield formed from ice over Vexen's arm, and he shrieked at him, “If you dare take another step - !”

Some small part of Kairi snapped out of it and moved her feet before she could fall to pieces, putting her into action.

She had to find the keys.

She darted down into the gloom with sudden disregard – for the time being, she was more afraid of Vexen's voice calling more pirates down than she was of Axel. Frantically, she searched for some hint of metal, and blocked out the hiss of steam.

Riku wasn't sure if he was about to witness another death, or whether or not he'd be allowed to live afterwards. Either way, he just... didn't really care. He watched the fire, watched Axel and Vexen, until a familiar flash of red hair caught his attention and widened his eyes.
Shoving flames against the shield, Axel diminished it effortlessly before knocking Vexen across the face with the hilt of the sword, throwing Vexen to the ground with a yelp. Axel strode forward, stamping on the side of his head to dislodge his consciousness, rattling him so badly he blacked out.

Plucking the ring off the hook on the wall, Kairi raced to the cell, parting keys already. Riku just stared, too stunned to summon any sort of feeling.

“Kairi... How did you get here?”

“I can't explain it all right now,” Kairi rushed. “Do you know which of these opens your cell?”

“No – I think it's a silver key, but that's all I've ever been able to tell.”

She didn't have time to pick one out. Kairi attempted to jam the first silver key into the lock without success.

Axel had stooped down with the sword put aside, ripping Vexen's shirt with ease to tie a gag around his mouth. Tightening the knot, he interjected, “It's the one starting to rust around the head.”

Thumbing through them hastily, Kairi managed to fit the correct key in the lock, but still needed all her strength to turn it.

Riku watched, tense. “... Listen – I'm going after Sora.”

Kairi looked up as she pushed open the cell door, disbelieving. “Riku, we're all going after Sora.”

“You can't,” he immediately shot her down. “It's too risky, and if I lose you too -”

“She's necessary,” Axel cut him off, tying Vexen's wrists securely behind his back. “You're the cargo.”

“It's not just Sora. They took Namine, too.” Kairi tossed the keys, and looked to Axel. “How are we getting out?”

Finished with Vexen, Axel grabbed the sword and held it out to Riku, who took it. “I hadn't planned on leaving from here, but... If I can just get us on deck, we might be able to go over the side with rigging rope. Unless we're very lucky, and the gangplank isn't being watched.”

“Do you think there's any chance of that?” Kairi gravitated ever-closer to Riku.

“My plan fell apart when you started adding extra steps. Let's just get on deck without being seen, alright?”


Why they were trusting a pirate was beyond him, but he wouldn't argue until they were off the ship. Kairi maintained the arrangement Riku had set for them unapologetically, instinctive fear not abated, and Axel led them up from the brig using the most direct route at his disposal.

Quiet, Kairi allowed her focus to drift. She was trying to feel Namine, and could... but she was distant. For just a few hours, after years, she’d been so close that she hadn’t needed to search for Namine’s presence, and just that brief indulgence seemed to be slowing her senses now.

They were near the hatch, and Axel could spot Xaldin after doing a cautious visual sweep of the deck. He was up in the rigging, but working alone – the crew was spread far too thin to have members where they weren't needed. It was a blessing, maybe, but the situation felt like a curse.
There would be no way to get to the ropes without Xaldin noticing, much less secure them and get them over the side.

But, *maybe* the gangplank, if they were fast enough...

“I'm all out of distractions, so we'll need to rely on speed,” he muttered, glancing at Riku and Kairi. “Are you prepared to run, and can you do it quietly?”

Kairi nodded. Her linen dress was already torn from climbing, it wouldn’t constrict her legs. Riku also gave a short nod.

“Good.” Axel glanced up, and saw that there was no point in waiting. Xaldin was immersed in fixing the sails; there was no better time. He opened the way forward, and hissed, “Then go. *Now.*”

Riku barely needed to be told. Both hands went to the hilt of the sword as he clambered on deck, soft on his feet and light assaulting his eyes. Kairi squinted, still adjusting to the impairment of the sword, but her bare feet made hardly a sound. They both kept low as they darted across the deck, Xaldin's back turned towards them but every movement menacing, and Riku made it to the gangplank in little time. He hadn't even descended all the way before dropping over the side, two feet landing in the shallow water below. The splash mingled with the constant slap of waves against the hull, and he whirled back immediately to watch for Kairi.

Axel had gone after them, mindful of Xaldin – he was coming down from the rigging, he'd catch them the moment he was on the deck and turning around – but he could practically see their failure in motion. Kairi was losing her balance on the thin plank, sending Riku a wordless, panicked plea. Lending one arm for support, Riku helped her off the side of the plank and almost right into his chest, and Axel bounded right over them just as Xaldin lowered himself from the sails.

Riku's breathing was deceptively and deliberately slow, compared to a dizzying heartbeat. Kairi's grip on him was tight, wide eyes traveling from him to Axel.

Flattened to the hull of the *Never Was*, Axel exhaled, then looked sharply to Kairi. “Well?” he demanded quietly. “How does this work?”

It took her a moment to get her bearings, and in that time, Riku brought her defensively to his other side. He wanted as much distance between her and Axel as possible, mistrust unabashedly apparent.

“I know which way she's headed,” Kairi whispered. “You'll have to follow where I lead. Agreed?”

“Agreed, so long as you defer to my judgment. I'm the only one capable of taking on whatever this island might throw at us, so if I say anything, that's what goes,” Axel warned.

“And we just have to trust you,” Riku frowned.

“If you want to get through this *alive*, yes.”

Kairi glanced up at Riku anxiously. “I don't think we have much choice.”

“... I know.”

“Then we have a truce,” Axel concluded, only to be met with a raised hand. Kairi looked no less reluctant, and clearly had a condition to set.

“Before I tell you the way, you must answer one thing for me.”
“Is this the time?”

“Just tell me why you're helping us. Why betray the others to follow the Captain?” she inquired shrewdly.

It wasn't worth his time or effort to lie. “Roxas,” Axel replied impatiently.

“Sora's brother?” Kairi looked to Riku in hopes of clarification.

“Yes,” Riku confirmed, forced neutral and eyes narrow. “You want him.”

“I want him alive, which he might not be for much longer unless we go, now,” Axel snapped, controlling his volume through every syllable. If Xaldin had even an inkling of suspicion, he could look out right down over the side and still catch them... and there was no telling what was happening to Roxas, as they wasted time here.

That seemed enough to put Kairi's trust on for the time being, though, and she hissed, “Follow me.”

Her arm was still on Riku as she splashed through the shallows, leading them inland. Riku kept pace with her, and Axel only spared one glance back at the Never Was before taking off with them.

They were silent for the first sprinted leg of the journey, hurrying along to get well out of the ship's view. Riku fixated on Kairi's presence, the sight and feel of her enough to make his head spin. It didn't make any sense that she was here, but she was still the only thing that made any sense to him at all. She was enough to inspire him to hold himself together, resolute and relatively strong.

She slowed once she'd lead them around a low formation of jagged rock wall. It provided enough cover, and gave all of them a chance to catch their breath. Axel adjusted his pack, craning his neck to look for any evidence that they'd been followed.

“Are you alright?” Kairi looked up at Riku, finally speaking now that they were clear. “Have they hurt you?”

“... I've been worse. What about you? What happened to you...?”

Axel grit his teeth, but didn't begrudge them the chance to talk so long as they were moving. He hated the sensation in his chest, whatever it was – he could only define it by its urgency. Kairi hadn't stopped leading them forward, taking them into the sparse thatch of trees.

“When we escaped, your father's ship found us,” Kairi explained, condensing the story as best she could. “He suspected Sora of being a saboteur, but...” she stopped, biting her lip. “Oh, Riku... I have to tell you...”

He'd tensed when Kairi called Ansem his father, but didn't say anything to that. He thought he knew what she was about to tell him, but needed her to say the words out loud. “... Go on.”

Kairi swallowed hard. She'd underestimated how painful it would be, finally saying these things to Riku's face. “I... I thought I convinced him to set Sora free, but when we ate with him... Sora's wine, it-- it was so horrible...”

Just as he'd thought. Hearing it confirmed was... worse. Riku's knuckles went white against his sword.

“I've seen Sora. They put him in my cell, he was--... I know. I know what Ansem did.”
“He's still alive, then?” Kairi's heart skipped. “Truly?”

“Xemnas thinks he needs Sora,” Axel spoke up. “He made sure he stayed alive.”

“... But his condition was poor,” Riku confirmed, making her relief short-lived.

“Ansem... he denied it, but I knew. I couldn't pretend not to know. They would have let Sora die if I hadn't insisted... but he wouldn't let me stay with him. He had me locked up in my room to keep me quiet... and I...” Kairi exhaled, taking step after step, and the grit underfoot bit into her bare heels. They hurt, and it felt a little bit like punishment. “I couldn't help myself. I told him how you feel about Sora, I just... Riku, I'm so sorry...”

Reaching for her, he lightly squeezed her arm.

“He knew,” Riku said, and it sounded a little hollow, like he was reciting what he had to tell himself countless times. “He knew from the very start... It doesn't matter. None of it was your fault, so don't blame yourself for any of it.”

The ground began to slope up, grit turning to a maze of larger rocks jutting menacingly out of the hard earth.

Kairi choked up. “Please, believe me, I never would say this if things had been any different... I know he's your father, but you can't go back to him.”

“He is not my father.”

It came out in a rush, surprisingly cold, and Kairi stared in shock. Surely, Riku meant he no longer thought of Ansem as his father — she was certain that was what he meant.

With interest of the vaguest sort, Axel did not interrupt, finding a firm grasp on the rock face. Kairi had stopped them before a mountainous fixture, the odd steps far too shallow to climb with ease. Riku only found them vaguely familiar, but thought he could maintain his footing well enough to help Kairi scale them. He started upwards, Axel already ahead, and adjusted his hold on the sword to offer her a hand.

“It's the reason they took me,” he explained, bringing her up with him. “They needed Ansem's bloodline... and I'm not part of it.”

“How could he not be...?” Kairi floundered with her understanding. She had to admit to herself, though, that she couldn't remember a single instance of Riku's mother ever being mentioned. From childhood to the present, she had lived with the assumption that Riku's mother must have died giving birth to him, and feared it was a sensitive topic for either man. Once, she'd even pitied Ansem, wondering how alike Riku looked to his mother.

He must be the spitting image of her, she'd thought. He looked nothing like Ansem, only bore his same bearing. Looking at his son probably reminded the Admiral of his wife, and she thought such a thing might be painful. A burden.

“I think he took me. Namine knows...”

Kairi's doubt vanished. “She drew it?”

“I don't know for sure. I wasn't-...” Riku balked. “... It was hard for me to listen.”

“Do you think it's true...?”
Once more, Axel interrupted, speaking down to them from the craggy slope. “It is true. Riku wouldn’t be here anymore, if they were related.”

“... So I suppose it doesn't matter what I think,” Riku muttered. Rumor or not, his life was spared by it.

“Maybe it's for the best...” Kairi spoke quietly.

His heart hurt like she'd just run it through with the point of her sword, but only for an instant.

“You're relieved?”

Hastily, she tried to amend, “No, no, it isn't that... Only, you're not bound to him. Not truly.”

Riku certainly didn't feel free of Ansem, but his mind went to Sora, as it so often did. What Ansem had done to him.

“... I won't be when we get back to Radiant Garden. He'll be imprisoned for what he's done.”

Riku understood what he had to do. Once he freed them all - Sora, Roxas, Namine, Ansem - once he’d returned them all to safety, he’d make his choice known. Ansem wouldn’t be able to influence him from behind bars.

As much as she liked to believe that was true, Kairi couldn't help the uncertainty stirring in her gut. “If he isn't...”

Riku tensed. “You think he wouldn't be?”

“Nothing is certain right now,” Kairi explained weakly, exhaustion showing through her composure. “If my parents are... If the King still reigns, he might consider his tenure as Admiral... Ansem might talk his way out of it somehow...”

It was like all the heat in Riku's body had been sapped, leaving cold in his veins.

“We're nearly at the top,” Axel informed them loudly. “Or would be, if you'd climb faster.”

“Right!” Kairi called, hauling herself up the wide, jutting protrusion of rock to be alongside Riku. Her grip on her sword was rather precarious as she used both hands to climb, and only became more so as she tightly took Riku's arm. “If it happens,” she went on quickly, “and Ansem keeps his rooms in the palace, there's a way we could still keep you from being near to him...”

There was one thought Riku had already formed, and had returned to it over and over again since the King and Queen had first started talking of their daughter reaching marrying age. “If you're thinking of an engagement... That would take years.”

Kairi blinked, almost stunned that she didn't have to suggest it first. “Not to arrange it. If we were engaged, you could be given a room in the royal wing.”

“Would His and Her Majesty approve?” Riku ruminated, and Kairi actually needed to contain a laugh.

“They've expected it since we were in the nursery together.”

“But... it may seem hasty, after all that's happened, and to move to the royal wing right away – people might talk.”
“After everything that's happened, a hasty marriage makes perfect sense,” Kairi countered. The Kingdom of Radiant Garden would need to rebuild, and having her wed would be the most logical step to take. She would need to start producing heirs, maintaining the bloodline... and that was even assuming that both her parents still lived. If not, her coronation would be almost immediate, and her marriage all the more important.

And, if not Riku... who else could she possibly expect a loving marriage from? They both understood and respected each other, knew what (and who) they really wanted. Kairi would be happy to let Riku spend his nights with Sora, and he would allow her Namine in kind. They could look out for each other, raise children together...

Marriage made sense, and surely always had. But she was right; 'sooner' would suit them, and the Kingdom, better.

Riku nodded slowly. “... You may be right about that, now that I think about it.”

“Speaking of haste?”

Axel jarred them out of their conversation from the plateau, and they both were quick to scale the rest of the way up. The level top to the shallow mountain was wide, completely smooth if not for the large circular pit ahead. The darkness Axel looked down into was vast and impermeable, nerve-wracking just to look at.

“... Hm.” Axel kept a foot away, crouching briefly and craning as though he might glimpse even a glimmer below. He had no luck.

Kairi came to a halt before the pit, a horrible feeling catching in her throat. “She's... below us. It feels like she's miles away...”

“... I didn't bring rope,” Axel grimaced, despairing.

“We won't need it.” Closing his eyes, Riku took a few short steps closer to the hole, brow creasing in concentration. Kairi watched him nervously, the intrusive image of a slip and plummet entering her brain. She could feel the depth, and only as far down as Namine was.

She was... so far below them.

Blocking his vision out had given Riku the bearings to concentrate, though. Although it was extremely distant, he thought he could hear a sort of abrasion against stone, a rumbling under their feet.

“I can hear something,” he explained, though it was an inadequate narrowing of what he was doing. Lifting a hand to silence Axel before he could ask, he elaborated, “It's a sort of... scraping sound, and it's getting closer...” Riku opened his eyes. “A lot closer.”

A moment later, it became apparent that he was right, as the pair behind him became aware of the grind of stone on stone just beneath their feet.

Strengthening her grip on her sword, Kairi took a cautious step back, not sure what she was expecting. Riku, instead, strode forward, just as a stone dais rose into view. It was massive, taking up the expanse of the pit neatly and creating a sunken space that looked like it'd been carved out of the flat peak.

Hastily, Axel went for his pack.
“We're following them down, right?” Kairi inquired softly.

“I am,” Riku immediately confirmed, “but it'll be pitch dark...”

“No, it won't.”

To everyone else's bewilderment, Axel had removed from his pack a glass jar and lid. The inside of it was a little dusty, but didn't look to contain anything else. Kairi gave him a strange look, but chose not to waste time asking what he was thinking.

“How does it move?”

“Only one way to find out. Everyone on.” Axel strode forward without hesitation, alarming Riku with his haste. He caught Kairi's hand and followed onto the dais, the two of them almost needing to leap down onto it as it started to sink at the first contact. Buckling at the initial lurch downwards, Axel had to hasten to regain his footing, and Kairi caught herself before she could overbalance, holding tight to Riku's arm.

The platform was lowering into the deep black. Giving one last look up at the pale sky, Axel took a breath and steeled himself, closing the lid on the jar.

Dazzling sunlight burst from his hands, startling Riku and whirling Kairi around. The glow was too much to look at directly, but warm. For a second, Axel could feel it – in his hands, reaching into his chest – and he started to grin.

“How...” Riku started, turning his head. The light was glaring if he looked at the source, but it was doing exactly what it should and casting light through the blackness. It wasn't enough to illuminate, but he could start to make things out – shapes... Walls.

“... Better keep sharp,” Axel nodded to Kairi, who returned it tensely and shielded her eyes.

The air around them was cold and rank, and although their descent was slow, it was constant. Stress twisted like a snake inside of Riku, wondering what state Sora was in... What state Ansem was in. It was distracting, and not aided by the foggy feeling eating away at his concentration.

Likewise, Kairi was beginning to feel hazy, uncertainty creeping in. She knew she could feel Namine, but... at the same time... was that what she felt? How could she be sure, in such a disorienting place?

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Axel squinted, having trouble making anything out past the light, but his glowing eyes had started to adjust. He could see something beyond and around them, dense enough to make out, yet insubstantial, coming in towards the dais as though it had been waiting for it. Kairi gasped, confirming that it wasn't only his imagination, and Riku lifted his blade to level it at the darkness.

A meager defense, but all they had.

It was not needed, as they'd sunk to the next level, leaving the indistinct threat behind. Riku stared up, and felt oddly like their way out had just been sealed. He couldn't see the sky, anymore, like the hole had been closed.

But that didn't matter so much as the other worrisome thought to strike him.

“... Do you think it stops... Or will we need to jump off?”

“I hope it stops,” Axel muttered.
Kairi's hand twisted around his arm, the point of her sword pressed down against the dais in attempt to keep her other one steady. “I can still hardly see...”

“Wish this was brighter...” As Axel spoke those words, he realized that the cold mist seemed to press in on their light as though trying to smother it. Kairi shivered.

Something was finally starting to strike Riku as familiar, in all this, but it wasn't his first time to Oblivion; that was still a blank slate, in his brain. No, it was reminiscent of the first time Ansem had blindfolded him, and Riku could recall in eerie detail. It was so prevalent, in the very forefront of his mind, that his whole reason for being here was almost chased out of his mind by it.

A name flickered through Kairi's mind over and over, until it started to seem out of place. She was beginning to doubt that she was even thinking the right one... or, perhaps, was it a name at all? Maybe she was thinking of something from a dream, or an old story.

Axel pressed down harder on the lid, watching another thick formation of rock pass them by on their way down a level, and light caught on something in the walls around them. The glittering reminded him of jewels, and greed – powerful and elated – rushed him, pressing him forward.

Where were they? Why were they here, if not to take whatever struck their fancy...?

Roxas – the thought of him, the memory of his face and voice and their covert conversations – slammed into that inclination, stopped Axel in his tracks.

The crystals passed over their head, and with alarming clarity, Kairi could feel her. Namine, as distinctly as though she were reaching out, or calling Kairi's name -

“There!” she pointed to a dim rectangular outline, already starting forward. “We have to get off there, now.”

Riku acted first. He ran forward, dropping to the ground below with ease and landing on both feet.

“You're sure-?!” Axel followed, not even hesitating despite his yell.

“If we don't, we'll lose them!” Kairi called, breathy and rushed, following Riku down. He held his sword away and reached out for her with his free hand, and she took it to leap down. Axel struggled to shield the jar on his way off the platform, almost forgetting why it was important once he was back on his feet.

But he remembered, and held it firm.

Steadying Kairi, Riku looked sharply around for the door and was unnerved by the reddish haze creeping in and out of the surrounding chamber, though it could have been a trick of the light.

“There...” he spotted it.

Kairi’s breathing was very shallow. The knowledge of everything behind her seemed to break apart and slip away, and only what lay ahead made sense.

“... You need to take my hand.” She spoke to Axel, sliding out of Riku's grip.

“Huh?” With a quizzical look, he accepted her outstretched arm.

Something had happened to Kairi’s inflection. She hardly sounded like herself, her voice taking on the sort of rich, ethereal quality expected from fortune-tellers. “The way ahead is opened, but we'll be
lost in it if we linger. Stay close,” she looked to Riku.

Riku swallowed his nerves. He wasn't sure he liked the way she sounded, until Namine's face came to mind. “Lead the way.”

He'd keep his eyes on Kairi, and thoughts on Sora. It wasn't difficult to remember him, anymore.

Axel held the light aloft, but it wasn’t Kairi who needed it. She guided Axel, steps quick without building up to a run, something pulling her as if tied to her body. She could have led them with her eyes closed; just as well, for it was harder and harder to distinguish their surroundings. Whatever was encroaching around them was oppressively familiar to Axel – he knew something like it, but couldn't remember what or how he knew it. If he'd ever been young, it may have reminded him of childhood. Distant and past, unclear and unwelcome.

They were coming upon a door, and Kairi was almost certain she could hear voices ahead through the haze. She closed her eyes, and reached out to Namine in her thoughts.

Her hands never stopped moving, scrawling over yellowed paper. Namine had been steered aside, ignored once she’d served her purpose. For every step of the journey, she’d been pressed for information, demanded of – Xemnas insisted on knowing everything that was happening ahead and behind them.

It had taken a painful amount of concentration to simply... draw. Xigbar, lurking in Axel's quarters while he slept. Kairi, huddled in a corner. Riku in a cell. Xemnas's crew, playing out the roles he no doubt wanted them to, until he was satisfied they were actually doing them.

Once she'd been cast aside, she could work, and she had to do it fast. Namine was trance-like in her focus, drawing rapidly and losing what little color she had in the process, but there was much to do. What she needed to accomplish was no small feat.

She had to try.

Only Ansem's eyes bothered to find her, now, and he growled through his gag. The process of preparing him was lengthy, as the Admiral was intent on fighting his binding to the arching spires, and Xemnas had been forced to aid Saix in tethering him. His irritation over having to perform his own menial tasks was evident, and Saix was paying Ansem for the insult by binding him tightly enough to hurt. He still took care not to damage Ansem's body, but he needed to regret his actions.

Ansem's eyes darted frequently from Namine to the twins, unnerved by the entire trio.

Roxas used his entire left side to support Sora, his own hand wrapped around his brother's to keep it on the hilt of the keyblade. Of everything to slip his mind, Roxas had not forgotten that he needed to maintain the appearance that they both were controlling his power.

“Truly a shame.” Xemnas traced Ansem's jaw with one finger, then gripped it disdainfully. Ansem ripped at the restraints again, jerking his head away with a fierce look. “I really would have preferred the Captain. He was far more... compliant.”

Xemnas swept around the black dais to take his place, and Roxas hoisted Sora a little higher.
“Got to stand up, they'll want us in a moment...” he murmured, urging. Sora was groggy in his confusion.

“What's happening...?”

He couldn't explain. “... Just follow my lead.”

Stepping into the hollow space between the crystal steps, Xemnas closed his eyes and allowed the void to swallow him from within. He took on the dim red haze as Roxas brought Sora along with his approach, progress slowed, and Ansem took on that sharp look of panicked disbelief. He'd hardly believed his eyes, watching them open the path earlier.

They lifted the keyblade together, pierced Xemnas through, and Namine finished her drawing.

The door opened, seemingly of its own accord.

Bright light pierced through the room first, obscuring the interlopers. Roxas couldn't move to react, the keyblade already vibrating forcefully with the glow of Xemnas's life. The sudden light appeared to be an extension of Roxas, to Sora's eyes – he was staring at his brother, the halo around him making spots dance around his vision.

Riku was blocked from view, and likewise he could hardly see Sora, bursting forth from the doorway first.

“Hope we're not interrupting,” drawled a voice from behind him.

Saix whirled towards the door, but held his ground. His eyes narrowed as Axel strode forward, letting go of Kairi to summon a chakram to his free hand.

“You had your chance at forgiveness, Axel,” Saix glowered, sounding disappointed.

“It turns out I wasn't interested,” he breezed, passing the jar to Kairi on his way to Saix. “I'd rather have the heart I was promised.”

Namine was still unguarded. Stunned to see her so, Kairi ran to her with the light in her arms, sword still in hand.

“Hold it close,” Namine only raised her eyes long enough to give Kairi a desperate look of gratitude, trembling hands still sketching at top speed. Kairi brought the jar of light right to her, brightening the paper that was steadily filling with shapes – faces, bodies, bowing to one figure -

Roxas was grabbed by the collar and hauled behind Saix, the immense claymore coming at his call. The jolt broke Sora's grip on the keyblade, throwing him to the ground with a tiny cry of strain. The keyblade remained in Roxas’s hands, glow completely undiminished. Riku looked nowhere else, bolting to Sora, and the chakram was hurled Saix's way to cover him.

It merely glanced off his weapon, and Saix growled.

Riku reached Sora, sliding his hand under his head to check for a wound, but Roxas could not move. The life clinging to his keyblade was like a squirming animal, a dog straining at its leash, as it sought a body to inhabit. Saix threw a brief look at the weapon, and his rage grew.

“So, the brother is merely human. Another of your lies...” he concluded gravely, raising the claymore over Riku and Sora with one hand. “Needless lives to be disposed of...”
There was barely time before the heavy blade was brought down on them. Riku threw his sword up to block it and felt the blade fracture, giving him only a moment to push Sora out of the way before it broke. A mite of focus was forced into Sora by danger, adrenaline pumping through him, but there was too much happening to make sense of.

Roxas cried his outrage, and strained to raise the keyblade in defense, but was neither able to control it or cast it aside. He pulled as hard as he could against Saix without the use of his arms, which was like trying to move a mountain for all the good it did.

“You want to talk about lies?” Axel shouted, trying to divert him again, and raised the second chakram. His skin had started to sizzle. “Let's talk about Xemnas's.”

He faced Axel, but Saix swung the blade back around to raise it for another attack. “I'm not interested in any more out of you.”

With no weapon, Sora did the only thing he could. He leapt on the arm still gripping Roxas, catching Saix off-guard enough to break his hold.

That was all the effect it had. Saix shook Sora easily and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him right off his feet.

“Sora -!” Kairi abandoned the jar on the floor, jumping to her feet. Namine drew more urgently.

“Let him go!” Riku straightened up, adjusting his grip on the broken blade, with nothing else at his disposal.

“You're being used!” Axel tried to get his attention, wildly determined to talk sense into him – it would be easier than a fight, he hoped, remembering everything their relationship used to be. “What makes you think this ritual will benefit anyone but Xemnas?!”

He was ignored. “Roxas. If you hope to see your brother spared, complete the ritual now.”

“What happened to you? I thought you couldn't be trained,” Axel snarled.

“I'll do it,” Roxas bit out. “Just let him go.”

Sora was clawing at Saix's hand, face purpling. Riku acted the only way he could, slashing at Saix's arm with the jagged metal and tearing flesh.

It was no good. Though blood sprayed from his opened skin, Saix kept his grip and turned to strike at Riku.

“I said I'll do it, now drop him!” Roxas shouted.

“Hn.”

To Riku's distraction, Sora was thrown to the ground, and he scarcely ducked Saix's attack. Sent tumbling several feet, Sora winced as he started to pull himself up, and Riku was snatched by the arm.

Namine raised her head, gripping at Kairi with a blackened hand. “Don't.”

Kairi was jerked back, having been prepared to charge forward with sword in hand. “Namine, they need me!”

Saix was charging Axel with a struggling Riku as his shield, twisting his sword arm viciously to
position him in the way. Alarmèd, Axel pivoted to one side and tried to get around Saix, doing what he could to avoid piercing Riku through with his hot spikes.

“I need you,” Namine implored, focused. “I need you to help Roxas.”

“Roxas? I don't know how -”

“Xemnas’s life force,” she explained, words almost slurred when she spoke so fast. “We can't let him go through with this ritual.”

“What?”

Expression twisted with unbidden fury, Saix swung the claymore down on Axel, clashing it against the chakram whipped up to meet it. The clash rang through the entire chamber, singing against eardrums, and Axel locked the spikes around the blade with all his strength.

“This is your last chance,” he urged Saix, teeth gritting together.

“His weapon, he has to get rid of it,” Namine shook, trying to clarify in few words; Kairi had no idea what she was talking about, but there just wasn't time.

She had to do something, regardless of what she understood. “I'll try.”

“Quickly...”

Roxas had made the climb up onto the dais, staring down at the still-struggling Admiral. The victim before him would be made into an enemy who could overpower them all, once Roxas did this... but he needed a weapon he could defend Sora with, regardless of Saix's ultimatum.

He'd be free to use the keyblade once Xemnas's essence was shaken from it, and the only way was to force it into Ansem... and Ansem's, out.

There was no other way.

With more brute strength than Axel, Saix’s claymore took the upper hand, forcing the chakram up with an ear-splitting screech of metal. His eyes narrowed, knowing he was overpowered, but he couldn't risk fire with Riku right there – as much as he was doing to fight his grip, Riku was no match. Saix had one hand for them each, and was still breaking Axel's defense. His arms were being shoved up above his head, putting him into a vulnerable position that Saix seized.

Making an abrupt decision, Saix turned the claymore in hand and struck at the opening, slamming the blunt end into Axel's side. The ribs broke under the force, knocking Axel down with a hard wheeze.

“I tire of you,” Saix snapped coldly, and adjusted his hold to the back of Riku's neck. Claws threatened to dig in, and he practically steered him as he turned, intending to ensure the task was done.

Kairi had run towards Roxas with no idea what she would do upon reaching him, and the sight of her halted Sora in his tracks. He'd been staggering towards Riku, seeing double and hardly making it past the dais, but hadn't noticed Kairi's presence until that moment.

“What are you doing here?!”

Rather than explain, she held her sword out to him. “You need this,” she told him, and scrambled up
alongside Roxas when he took it.

The keyblade was still pointed down at Ansem's heart, unwavering, but Roxas hadn't driven it down yet. He couldn't tell if hesitation was making it impossible to move, or it was another force controlling him. Kairi seized his arm, making him start, but he remained rigidly in place.

“Come down, I can help you,” she urged, but his grip was impossible to break. The pull towards Ansem was magnetic; he couldn't sever it, and he was trying. Roxas shook his head stiffly, and Kairi turned hers, demanding, “Sora, help me get him down!”

Riku had wrangled himself to get a better grip on his broken sword, and shoved it backwards towards Saix's gut. It had pierced him much too shallowly, scraping him deeply across his side rather than anywhere more debilitating, but it had still halted Saix for the time being. His claws pierced into Riku's neck, making him screw his eyes shut against the pain.

He was too strong to escape, but with a sword in hand, Sora had thought – maybe – that he could charge Saix. Kairi's command almost tore him in two, looking frantically between Riku and his brother before diving for Roxas's other arm.

Seizing his shattered side, Axel pushed himself off the floor with a rough hiss, rapidly re-evaluating. It took him time to clamber to his feet, chakram reforming in his free hand.

Xemnas. His eyes landed on the Captain's glowing form, more vulnerable than he'd ever been. If Axel could get around all the people, he could destroy his body with one clean throw...

But... no, that was no good. Killing an empty body wouldn't accomplish more than distracting Saix for a moment.

In panicked haste, Sora was less careful with Roxas than he normally would be, up on the dais and pushing him in the same direction Kairi was trying to pull him in. “Get down,” he urged her, as his only desperate option became clear, “just try to make sure he doesn't get hurt when I push him...”

Leaping down, Kairi stood to the side, poised.

“Sorry, Roxas,” Sora swallowed and forced him over the edge, stumbling badly and nearly falling with him. Roxas slipped back, landing on his feet but buckling when they hit the ground and nearly overbalancing. Kairi managed to catch him around the waist, preventing him from hitting the floor.

“I've got you...”

The keyblade tried to drag Roxas back towards Ansem, but Kairi was pulling him physically harder. “What -”

“We have to get rid of that thing! I'll help you, just trust me!” As bodily as she could, Kairi pulled him towards Namine. If she could just get him there, they'd surely have some idea of what to do.

Namine had finished another drawing, the last of them, but frenetically checked them over. She needed to cover all her bases, she felt as though she'd missed something – but something was happening, far too fast to stop it, and she dropped her sketches. Gasping sharply, she bolted onto her knees, and only got that far.

“Sora!” Axel yelled, lips tweaking into a violent grin as his eyes landed on Ansem. “Move!”

“What are you doing?!” he shouted back, with barely enough time to get the words out.
Saix's eyes found Sora first, then Axel. He understood at once, and threw Riku aside with enough force to send him skidding. “No -”

Hitting the ground, Riku couldn't lift his head in time. He didn't understand until steel had already soared past.

Sora had only an instant to make a choice. His sword was lifted reflexively, defending Axel's target out of instinct, but he misjudged the height of the whirling chakram heading right for him and Ansem. The blade glanced off it too narrowly to knock it off-course, and blood showered the black floor. Sora disappeared over the edge of the dais, breath expelled from his lungs.

Kairi screamed, Roxas choked on a yell. For a moment Axel only cared that Sora had interfered, gnashing his teeth until he registered blood.

The pain was muted by shock. Sora stared up into the abyss, unable to sit up right away like he meant to. His head throbbed where it had bounced off of rock, and below his knee on one side something felt… not right.

He heard Saix snarl Axel's name as he lunged for him, and Axel didn't have time to focus on him anymore. Fire blasted towards his assailant, chakram vanishing to reappear in his hand.

Riku single-mindedly made his way to Sora, arms winding around him, and the pain registered when he was moved. Sora sobbed, feeling the nerves in his wounded leg scream.

“I'll get you down... I'll get you out...” Riku heard his pulse pounding, more than his own voice.

Momentarily frozen, Kairi let Roxas wrench himself away from her, and he nonsensically tried to shake the keyblade out of his hands.

Posture rigid, Namine recommenced drawing, starting on a new sheet and repeating to herself, “It will be fine... It will be...”

It was hard to hear her through the shrill sounds of clamoring steel – Saix was aiming for nothing less than to kill Axel, and through his pain he was focused solely on defending himself. Kairi was attuned to Namine like no other, though, and her voice returned scant sense to Kairi. She grabbed Roxas again, urging him along. “Riku's got him, we have to get rid of it.”

Breathing hard, he came very close to shoving her back. Darkness was clouding over all Roxas's thoughts – he wanted to hate everyone but Sora, what did he care anymore?

Riku was brushing hair out of Sora’s pale face, not daring to move him more after the agonized sound he’d made, but needing to be sure he was still conscious.

He couldn’t clear the memory from his mind’s eye - the chakram spinning overhead, and Sora moving to block it with a weapon that never stood a chance.

“Why would you do that?” He quavered, refusing to look at the damage. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see deep red. “You... I'll take you away from here...”

Sora's voice was far more unsteady. “He w-would have killed him... He st-... still could...”

It took him a stunningly slow moment to understand. Riku raised his head, belatedly realizing that he needed to untie Ansem.

“Kairi! Look after Sora!”
She stopped trying to get Roxas to Namine, and redirected her route. “Never mind, come with me.”

“Agh-...” Roxas hissed, the key in his hand starting to burn and pull as he was drawn back to Sora's side. It seemed to know its target was coming close again, and it would force him there by any means necessary.

Loathe to do it, Riku made himself leave Sora once he was in Kairi's arms, turning quickly and rushing over to Ansem.

“I've got you,” she murmured to him, eyes stinging. She inhaled faintly at the sight of his wound. His leg had been sliced nearly clean through - the bones that had prevented the chakram from taking it off completely were visible within the ripped-open flesh, their broken points like fangs in a bleeding maw.

It was more than she could stand to look at, but she had to at least slow the bleeding, maybe keep the fractured pieces of his leg together before the wound became any worse. Roxas was doing all he could just keeping the keyblade forced to the ground, but there would be time to think of what to do about it later.

Kairi eased Sora down gingerly, shaking hands lifting her dress where it had been torn once before. The cloth had already soaked up some of the rapidly-expanding pool of blood, and her legs were sticky with it. Taking hold of the cleanest section she could find, Kairi pulled at the edges of the fabric as hard as she could, and didn’t stop until she had torn a strip from seam to seam.

“J-just hang on…”

Standing at the dias, Riku gave the knots a sweeping inspection. The faster he freed him, the faster they could leave – he'd carry Sora out, Kairi would follow with Namine, they could both keep Roxas under control... and Ansem, unharmed, could follow by his own power. Automatic and unthinking, Riku pulled the gag out of his mouth first, and found Ansem's eyes boring into him.

“My boy…” he inhaled deeply. “Thank goodness you've come to your senses…”

Ansem hadn't raised his voice, but suddenly it was the loudest thing in Riku’s ears. The clash of weapons wielded with inhuman strength, Kairi’s panicked flurry, Sora’s gasps and whimpers of pain - all of it faded to background noise, muffled and far away, like the sounds of the harbor from behind the windows of Ansem's bedroom-

Riku faltered, joints locking with a surge of tension and – illogically – fear. “... I'll loosen those knots,” he breathed, fingers fumbling as he reached for the ropes around his wrists.

Ansem craned his neck to watch. “Once I'm freed, I'll take us far from this... insanity.”

To no avail, Riku tried to steady his hands, expression cold. “I won't go anywhere with you.”

“Don't be absurd,” Ansem snapped sharply.

“After what you did to Sora? And to Kairi?” Riku's entire world had narrowed to Ansem, and he lowered his voice with a burning glare. “What you did to me? I'm only freeing you to -”

Riku faltered under the look on Ansem's face.

“This is far beyond childish, Riku,” he told him, his tone commanding, the same voice that had always kept Riku under his heel. “That boy isn't even human.”
The makeshift splint had been wrapped tightly around Sora’s leg, tied as Kairi apologized over and over. It was all she could think to do, having no knowledge of medicine to speak of, and the linen was already soaked through. All she could do was hope it would be enough until someone with real expertise could look at the wound.

It just had to buy Sora time…

They needed time.

She sat back, looking past the dias and hearing nothing but Axel's endeavor to fight Saix with failing energy. Her eyes flickered to Roxas's struggle, the keyblade no less determined and more alive with intent by the moment, and was struck by her uselessness. He was the one Sora needed most.

She couldn't do any more help them. There was only one thing she could think to do, at all.

“Don't you see,” Ansem spoke faster, coaxing. “He's some kind of demon... Seducing you away from your home, poisoning you against your family... He's one of them, Riku. One of those monstrous pirates.”

Riku listened, but, for once, did not believe a word.

He was going to free Ansem to get Sora out, to rescue everyone he cared about... but did he have to listen to save them?

Did he have to free Ansem at all?

Axel was backing away from Saix, but with the wall close behind him, there was nowhere left to run to.

“... Stay with him,” Kairi instructed Roxas as she drew away from the twins. She crouched, locating the sword Sora dropped in his fall.

Blearily, Sora lifted his head. “Kairi... What's happening?”

She steeled herself, grasping the sword and flicking spattered blood from its blade as she stood.

“Don't worry, Sora. I'll protect everyone.”

Her bare feet slapped almost soundlessly against the floor as she charged at Saix. The sword sliced across his back, splitting skin, and he howled with rage.

Riku froze at the sound, but his eyes were still on Ansem.

Taking advantage of the interference, Axel gathered a handful of flames when Saix wheeled around tensely to defend himself. Kairi lifted the sword again, trembling at the full fury of him looming over her. Everything clattered to the floor around Namine as she bolted to her feet, hands flying up to her mouth.

There was a high shriek of pain, a ringing clatter of steel hitting stone. Saix had been fully prepared to cut her down when Axel’s counterattack scorched up his wounded back. Instead, he’d grabbed her by the hair and swung her mercilessly between them, shielding himself once more.

“Kairi!” In spite of everything, Sora started to force himself over to get to his knees. He dropped again with a groan, leg making an unpleasant snapping noise that flattened him in agony.

“Typical,” Axel laughed venomously, chakram raised. “You think I won't cut her down to get to
you?”

At last, Riku looked up at the fight, and clarity cut through Ansem's grasping influence.

“My son is no traitor...” Ansem started to struggle in his bonds, seeing the falter in Riku’s eyes. “You will free me, now.”

“If she is nothing to you, then very well,” Saix thrust her forward. “The distractions end here.”

“Don't -!” Namie stumbled forward, terrified.

Kairi clutched at her hair, calling out desperately. “Riku ...!”

Riku spotted his broken sword, only a grab away.

“I'm not your son.”

He abandoned the dais, ignoring Ansem’s call of his name, and grabbing the abandoned hilt on his way to Kairi. Axel was looking sharply to Namie with an irate groan, risking Kairi with one last imploration.

“Just drop her and finish me off, if you think you can -”

Saix had no opportunity to respond. With all his strength, Riku knocked the hilt across the back of Saix’s head. Saix only looked startled, the glow fading from his eyes as he pitched forward, grip slack. The claymore vanished as his bulk hit the floor heavily, and Kairi had to scramble to avoid being crushed. She breathed hard, and Namie's chest heaved in time with hers. Her eyes were still wide, hands still over her mouth.

Shaking with tired tension, Riku dropped the sword hilt and knelt by Kairi, helping her up. She was badly bruised and her eyes still watered, but she seemed otherwise unhurt. She backed away sharply from Axel the moment she was standing, but he didn't seem to notice.

“... He's down,” Axel determined, stunned, once he’d checked Saix over carefully. He'd been prepared to do more if he was still a threat, but there was no sign that he'd stir.

Riku kept one arm on Kairi until he was sure he could return to Sora. “Good. Keep him there.”

“The keyblade,” Namie reminded them fretfully, lowering her hands at last. Roxas looked from Sora to her.

Far from calming its energy, Saix’s fall seemed to make the force possessing the keyblade more desperate still. His arms ached with the effort of keeping it from wrenching them out of their sockets, and his palms felt like they’d been seared away to raw flesh. It seemed more possible to pull his hands off at the wrists than to separate them from the hilt.

“I could end this…” he whispered it down to Sora, like a promise. “If I could just get it to disappear...”

Flocking to Namie's side, Kairi brought her closer to the others. “Does anyone know how to do it...?”

Before she answered, Namie took the time to fix Ansem's gag back in place, not wanting Riku distracted while he gingerly lifted Sora. His words were muffled, but the hate came through loud and clear. She paid no mind, even as his eyes went wide at the sight of her, in what seemed to be fear.
“Sora might suppress it, but... I don’t know how...”

Roxas positioned himself to bring the keyblade within Sora's reach. There were wide streaks of blood on the floor under him, and Sora leaned heavily into Riku as he reached out an unsteady hand.

It wrapped around the hilt alongside Roxas's, and they waited breathlessly for something to happen.

Axel's chakram vanished in a burst of fire and he stepped towards them, pace very measured and eyes on the key.

The seconds crept by. Riku's arms adjusted around Sora, all his strength in keeping him upright. The smell of blood was making him feel even weaker, and all his silent willing for this to end was coming to nothing.

Namine spoke very quietly. “If you can let it go...”

“I'm trying,” Roxas sounded panicked. “Why isn't it working?!!”

Sora's other hand went to Roxas's arm, feeling it shaking. “If you can give it to me... Maybe that will make it vanish...” He looked to to Namine and Kairi for confirmation, but it seemed his guess was as good as any.

“I don't know how... Even if I do, it always comes back when I need it...”

Axel crossed his arms. “...Do you need it, anymore?”

Roxas glanced up at him sharply, startled. His gaze was met by glowing green, Axel holding his side with an expression he couldn't read. There were too many things that Roxas was feeling at once to settle on a reaction to his presence. “I...”

He wasn't sure, now.

“You won't need it on the Never Was,” Namine suggested carefully. “We're almost free...”

Sora recognized that look, could tell what he was thinking. “You don't need it to protect me. You already did.”

“No, I didn’t,” Roxas denied. “I couldn't protect anyone...”

How could Sora have even said so? He sounded so weak, he was still losing blood... The more time Roxas wasted with his own inability to cast aside the keyblade, the more his wound would worsen. Would he sit here, struggling with himself as Sora bled his life out waiting for him?

Namine knelt next to him. “Roxas... we're this close now because we've all tried to protect each other. We're all still alive.”

“If you give it to me... I think we could go home,” Sora reassured him, as best he could in his fragile state. “And we can go back to looking out for each other...”

“... You can go home,” Axel muttered. Roxas couldn't look at him.

Maybe some part of him had expected that Axel would hoard him, like he did all his treasure. Perhaps an even smaller part had thought he might hoard Axel right back, if he was bound to live out the rest of his existence on the Never Was.

But Axel was letting him choose Sora. The keyblade started to feel lighter in his hand, and Roxas
willed it to pass to him.

Pain was pushed to the back of Sora's mind as he silently urged the same, starting to take on some of the glow from Roxas's body. Riku stabilized his arm quickly, and Roxas felt something give under his burning palms. It was astounding he could feel his hands at all, as the keyblade had seemingly been trying to become a part of his body.

Then he buckled with a sharp intake of air, Sora echoing the sound as he found himself suddenly supporting the full weight of the weapon. The feeling of it only lasted long enough for him to look up at Roxas, before the keyblade disappeared in a bright flash of light.

Breath left Axel, taking something along with it. He felt... a little more vacant. He told himself he couldn't feel anything to begin with, anyway.

Relieved, Namine started to smile, until the ground beneath them shuddered and at once felt... less. Tiny pieces of their surroundings were peeling off and curling through the air, dissolving into nothing. Kairi looked anxiously towards her, bracing herself.

"Is this supposed to happen?"

"Xemnas-..." Namine's eyes widened, looking at the empty vessel his body used to be. "His purest form is Nothingness. He's loose..."

"What?" Axel looked at her sharply. "What does that mean?"

"We have to go!" She sprang up, and bolted to her fallen pages.

"Help me with Sora," Roxas looked immediately to Riku, getting an arm under his brother to support carrying him out.

"I have him..."

"I'll slow you down," Sora groaned weakly, and was immediately dismissed by them both.

"Sora, shut up."

"We'd never leave you," Riku agreed determinedly, and carried him past the dais without so much as a backward glance.

Kairi looked hastily at the dais, taking in Ansem twisting and grunting frantically, before running to Namine's side. She was gathering up the scattered pages in a frenzy.

"Do we need them?" Kairi asked, strained.

"Our lives depend on them."

"...Alright." Kairi delved down to help.

Against his better judgment, Axel slowed next to Saix and crouched down to haul him onto his back. He could hear his ribs crack in protest as he hefted the dead weight. He winced, but did not drop him, muttering, "I can't lose everything in one day..."

They reached the deteriorating doorway as Namine snatched the last drawing, the edges of the paper already starting to dissolve. At last, she noticed Ansem, and looked between him and the group with alarm.
“Come on!” Axel yelled, pained under the weight.

“What about Ansem?!”

“Just go!” Riku insisted, ignoring the muffled shouts. “We don't have time!”

Kairi bolted towards the door with the drawings under her arm, and Roxas kept pace with Riku, trained on him in case he started to slow down.

“Did you grab the light?” Axel hissed, lurching to the doorway.

Namine shook her head. “Just get to the door and keep running – it'll take us out to the island!” she called, and Riku threw the passageway open.

Sunlight dazzled them all, its reflection off the white sand temporarily blinding as a breeze off the sea drove the stale air of Oblivion from their lungs with painful suddenness.

Kairi dashed through first, the least laden of them all. They were on the beach, only a short sprint from where the ship was still anchored. Grains of sand ascended around their feet until they became nothing, trees peeling apart in long, coiling strips. “The entire island.”

“It's being erased from existence,” Namine panted. “We have to sail away, it's our only chance.”

“Back to the Never Was? And we'll fight them how?” Axel grit his teeth.

“Just trust me!”

They ran, loping unsteadily, and had no choice but to put their stock in Namine's word. The ship was close, Roxas could see Xigbar hanging from the rigging, shouting something to the crew as the group approached. He steeled himself, trusting Namine, and pounded up the gangplank.

It was then he saw Axel's approach, and the heavy figure on his back. “Him, too?”

“Yes, him too,” Axel replied tersely, and dragged him up the gangplank with a pained groan.

“We need to get Sora somewhere, maybe... convince the crew to help him, somehow...” Riku's voice lowered as he spoke, winded.

Xigbar glided smoothly down the ropes, approaching in confident strides. Kairi found herself wishing she'd delayed long enough to keep the sword, and Namine caught her arm, apprehensive.

She wasn't certain she'd managed to pull it off. She'd thought so, at the time... but in all the panic, she now had doubts.

“You can't fight them with me on your back,” Sora murmured, weaker by the moment. Roxas shook his head, but didn't protest further.

“I'll handle it... You couldn't take 'em, anyway...” Axel lowered Saix, cringing and flexing his hands. They ached, but he was seconds away from summoning his chakram.

Riku hissed at him. “You'll be killed if you -”

Xigbar interrupted, flinging his arms out in a welcoming manner. “He-ey, that was some trip, eh, Boss-man?” He directed his grin towards Riku. “We were startin' to think we'd have to come looking for ya.”
Axel's hands were still extended, warmth building between his fingers. With only the barest thought, the air would ignite and he would close his hand around the solid steel that took shape within the fire. He could throw it into Xigbar's chest – no, he should aim for the throat. If he got lucky, he'd take his head clean off, and they could take the rest of the crew hostage with scare tactics.

But he did no such thing, for Xigbar was still regarding Riku with genial respect. Uncomprehending and mistrustful, Riku parsed through the demeanor to the possible threat.

"Look for me?" he echoed, wondering if orders had been issued in the event they found his cell empty. But, if that'd been the case, why had they waited before sending out a retrieval team?

And why had he not attacked now? They were clearly in no fit state to fight back, and with Xaldin coming towards the crowd, they were unquestionably at a disadvantage.

"Yeah, you were gone for -..." Xigbar halted, catching sight of Saix slumped on the deck. "Whoa, what happened to him?"

Gently holding Kairi's arm, Namine started forward and drew stares from the others. "There will be time for that later... Sora needs help, and we need to sail away from the island, as fast as we can."

"... She's right, something's happened to this place," Riku tore his gaze from her, cautiously grasping at the idea that they weren't in immediate danger. "If we don't head to open water immediately..."

"I'll pass the message on to Demyx," Xigbar declared, and opened a rift to vanish into. Used to this occurrence, Xaldin didn't bat an eye and instead began shifting the wind to their favor.

"Should we have someone take them down to Zexion, Captain?" Xaldin inquired, jerking his chin towards their injured parties. Sora lifted his head slightly, and Riku caught himself in time. Had he not had composure all but beaten into him, he would have gaped.

They were deferring to him.

"... Sora first."

With a short nod, Xaldin went to raise the gangplank with an expectant eyebrow raised at Axel. "You can carry him down, can't you? And summon Lexaeus to carry Saix."

"Ribs are broken," Axel explained with narrowing eyes. He was still wrapping his head around this utter shift in reality.
“I’ll carry Sora down myself – Axel, get someone to help... him,” Riku instructed shortly, eyeing Saix. “Roxas?”

“Right.” Correctly having assumed the brothers would want to stay close, Roxas aided in supporting Sora as the two of them carried him below deck. They managed to avoid Xigbar on his way up, Demyx locked under his arm until he wriggled out of his grip and rushed to the edge.

“Whoa...” Demyx marveled at the sight of the disappearing island, Nothingness eating it away from the inside and collapsing it steadily. It appeared to be dissolving into both the water and the air, but particles were not trapped on the wind, nor did they seem to be dispersing in the waves.

“Luxord not here, yet?” Xigbar questioned, ignoring the spectacle. “Gave him word on the way. Thought we could use the speed.”

Axel replied with manufactured nonchalance. “You know Luxord... Thinks he has all the time in the world...”

Having noticed that they had yet to move as they were meant to, Xaldin barked to Demyx, “We're putting as much sea between us and the island as possible.”

The sitar was summoned in a burst of mist, Demyx backing up with his eyes still on Oblivion as it shrank. “Right, yes sir!” he yelled back in the subtest exasperation, as though he was greatly fatigued, and started to play. The waves were urged to rise up and push the hull from the disintegrating sands.

“We'll be safe, now,” Namine told Kairi softly, and she clued in.

“You did something...?” Kairi whispered back.

Nodding, Namine held the recovered drawings to her chest. They’d been smudged, a little, but the lines were still clear enough to make out the figures she'd drawn on seven pages, one for each of the pirates who'd stayed on the Never Was. “Their memories. They believe Riku's their Captain.”

Kairi was breathless with awe. “I had no idea you could do that...”

“I am memory,” she smiled slightly, “but I've been lost without you. With you... I managed.”

With wide eyes, Kairi took Namine's hand and led her apart from the pirates involved in their tasks, lest they be overhead. “Will it last? I mean, are their memories changed... permanently?”

“I can't say for sure... but I think so.”

Regardless, Namine did not appear overly concerned. Kairi squeezed her hand as she lit up with understanding.

“They can take us home.”

Namine nodded quickly. “They only need to sail under Riku's command long enough.”

She began to beam and pulled Namine into a desperate embrace, a little stunned. “You really did it... You saved us...”

“We'll be home,” she confirmed, holding Kairi tightly and feeling her heart pound right against her chest.

Riku and Roxas had not made it very far into the hull when they met Luxord, and the pair of them
halted in both surprise and uncertainty. Luxord, unaware of any reason they should be wary, whistled.

“He’s seen better days. Shall I, Captain?” Luxord tucked away a flask and extended his arms in suggestion. As much as Riku felt like reality was coming apart around him, he focused only on Sora and what it might take to see him healed.

“Anything to get him help faster,” Riku agreed. Roxas gave him a sidelong look, not liking the situation any better.

“Right,” Luxord took him, and Sora tensed as he was transferred into his arms. “Drop him in Zexion's lap, then, shall I?”

“I'll follow them,” Roxas said immediately.

“Thank you...” Riku was still visibly hesitant. He wouldn't have wanted to part with Sora for anything, but he didn't even know where to go. Both Kairi and Namine were still up on deck, besides, and he couldn't just leave them in the hopes they'd be left unharmed. Hastily, he reassured Sora, “I'll be with you soon. It'll be alright.”

He'd have his brother... He'd be safe. Unconsciousness threatened to creep up on Sora, now that they didn't seem to be in danger, and he could not respond. Luxord moved through time and left Roxas to catch up, and Riku retreated back up on deck.

Axel had not yet gone to get Lexaeus. He knelt by Saix and scrutinized him, deliberating on his own decision to save him and thinking out his next steps. Oblivion was only a speck, now; the work of distance and its own collapse, for Demyx had caught his rhythm and the sails had caught the wind. They were moving fast, and though Riku had entertained the brief fear that the Nothingness would spread and consume more than just the island, that didn't appear to be the case.

For comfort's sake, Kairi had not unwound from Namine. Images of the worst scenarios they could return to had unwillingly flooded her brain, and she was determined to hold onto the glow of victory for as long as she possibly could. She only let go to turn to Riku, wrapping her hand around his arm and drawing him close to explain how Namine had made him Captain.

His concerns were swept away, and left only shock behind. Riku stared at her. “... What about the rest of you? What about -”

“None of us are the enemy – they don't remember, so they've taken their cues from you,” Namine reassured him. “They’ll help Sora because that's what the Captain ordered them to do, and they won't harm any of us.”

“So as soon as we're out of danger, you only need to order them to sail to Radiant Garden,” Kairi concluded, and once again ignored the twinge of fear that whispered of lost parents and devastated homes.

Riku was still staring, slack-jawed, at Namine. “That's... That's brilliant. How...”

Her cheeks went palest pink. “It's difficult to explain. For now -”

“Sora – I need to get back to him,” Riku finished, focus sharpening. Kairi clasped his hand.

“Before you go... Are you alright?”

“... I don't know,” he answered truthfully, though he'd meant to spout a quick, comforting lie.
“We can go with you, if you need...”

“It's alright. You should stay together, spare yourselves having to see... whatever they'll have to do, to save him.”

Kairi frowned. “After everything, do you still think of us as so delicate?”

“We'll come with you,” Namine chimed in, brow creased in concern. “I'd like to see how Roxas is coping, as well...”

Abashed, Riku glanced away and cleared his throat. “I – alright, very well.”

“We might be of some help...” Though she couldn't fathom what they might be enlisted for, Kairi steeled herself for whatever she might be asked to do. Namine nodded in agreement.

“Let's go, then.”

Following Riku, Kairi only lingered to cast one look back at Axel, uncertain what to make of him. He was inspecting the back of Saix's head, looking for the wound that struck him out cold, and getting up to fetch Lexaeus at last.

A mistake quickly became evident, though, when Riku paused in uncertainty and two pairs of eyes landed on Namine.

“Do you know where they are...?”

Namine's own gaze lowered. “I don't... I haven't seen very much of this ship.”

“If I can find that pirate from before,” Riku thought aloud, trying not to let anxiety overwhelm.

“Do you know where he went?”

He began to shake his head, but stopped at the sight of Luxord swaggering forth. He'd left Sora and Roxas behind, considering his duty done, which was to Riku's benefit right then. “You -”


“- Luxord. Sora's alright?”

“You could say that, Captain,” Luxord snorted, taking an idle swig from his flask. “That leg's hanging by a thread.”

Kairi flinched. “Could you take us to him?”

His smirk bordered on a leer, and Namine's hold on her arm tightened. “Right this way, Your Highness,” he drawled, turning on his heel to lead them back the way he came. With a hard swallow, Kairi followed, and Riku kept up with long strides and a straight back.

He was tense. All he felt was tension, and that was for the better. Tension felt like something strong, holding up the worry attempting to crush him. Luxord was dismissed upon arrival, and Riku gave a sharp knock to the cabin door to announce his arrival.

Zexion was not shaken, though both Sora and Roxas jumped. With an expression of distaste, he'd unwrapped the ragged linen binding Sora's leg and inspected the wound. It was not so much the sight disturbing him as Vexen's absence, though his mind was an utter blank in trying to guess where he'd gone.
“Enter,” he permitted the interloper impatiently, and Sora raised his dizzy head.

His teeth were clamped tight together to keep from making too much disruptive sound. Sora was almost vibrating with strain, trying to find solace in the hand locked around his. Roxas was by his side, emitting a glow so faint that it could have been a trick of the light.

He'd thought it might recover when they left Oblivion, but it hadn't. Roxas's power was just as faint as it was when his keyblade disappeared... and that meant he could do nothing to help.

Approaching the surgery table, Riku went around and sought Sora's other hand. In spite of her declaration, Kairi was almost unable to look at him, and Namine covered her mouth to cover biting her lip.

“... What's going to happen?” Riku questioned. Sora's grip on his hand was clammy and weak. Roxas watched the two of them together without saying a word.

“The bone has shattered within the wound,” Zexion reported. So blase, devoid of any comfort or condemnation. “The bone itself could heal in time, perhaps, but in the damp the flesh will surely fester. The infection will kill him before it can be repaired.”

Riku was not unfamiliar with the procedures employed by a ship's surgeon. He knew what would have to be done, even before Zexion could tell him. He forced his own voice steady, level, because it wouldn't help anyone to panic. To get emotional. To show fear.

“It will have to come off.”

Namine inhaled sharply. Staring straight ahead, Roxas squeezed his hand hard as Sora's head tipped back to stare at Riku in horror.

“... You're the strongest person I know,” Riku said to Sora, quiet. With those words, he was pleading with him to agree, to go through with the procedure. He would not decide for him, but the idea of watching a festering wound kill him was too much to bear.

For Sora, the idea of being cared for the rest of his life, an invalid, made him feel even more ill. “I-I can't be crippled... I'll be useless...”

“You will never be useless.” Riku locked his fingers around Sora's.

“Please,” Roxas implored him, “don't make me go through losing you again...”

“There are skilled healers in the kingdom, and I'm sure a... replacement could be made,” Kairi chimed in, voice fragile. “I-I could make sure... The best care there is...”

She'd started to stammer. She couldn't hide her panic as well as she wished to. Namine held her arm tightly, but every breath shook so badly it was a wonder she hadn't fainted dead away.

Roxas tried to comfort him and bargain with him, all in one. “It's not hopeless... You can have a life after this. Together, we can...”
Tears were gathering in Sora's eyes, and Riku preemptively brushed his cheek with one hand. “You'll be alright. I promise... Just... live.”

A few tears slipped from his eyes and over Riku's fingers. All at once, Sora was disappointed and terrified and thankful, looking from him to Roxas. Wordlessly, he nodded.

“I'll stay. I'll be with you through it all...” Roxas vowed.

“Will you need anything to do it?” Riku looked to Zexion, doing everything he could to be stronger than he felt. Zexion had only been listening for the confirmation.

“I'll need Axel and Lexaeus to assist me. Some of you will have to leave to allow space.” A note of irritation colored his last few words, and Riku hesitated.

If he needed the room, then...

“Only Roxas will stay,” Riku decided, looking at him. “I'll have them both here immediately. I won't go far,” he added, lowering his voice as his gaze returned to Sora. “You'll be safe...”

Blatantly surprised, Roxas nodded stiffly. Sora, however, had gone rigid.

“I don't want you to go anywhere...”

Zexion moved about silently as he prepared, opening up a kit and a wooden case of vials and small jars. He began picking out a few of each.

“I have to-... to get Axel. I'll come back.”

“You'll stay...?”

Riku's heart wrenched, and he could not deny him. “I'll stay.”

“Can you follow orders, Captain?” Zexion interjected sternly. The look Riku gave him was unnervingly reminiscent of Ansem at his most severe.

“I will ensure you have all the room you need, and I'm going now. Make him as comfortable as you can.” With a kiss to Sora's hand, as much for his peace of mind as Sora's, he parted from him and flew by Kairi and Namine. He'd waste no time.

“We should go,” Namine urged Kairi, who nodded faintly.

“Right...”

They hastened out of the room, almost flattening their backs to the wall to allow anyone past who might come along. Namine turned wide, watery eyes to Kairi, biting her lip. She was queasy with fear. “Should we do something?”

“I don't know what we can do,” she confessed, hanging her head. “Maybe... there's some way to help the crew?”

Given the physical state they were in – weak, exhausted, and sicker with the passing of each worry-wracked second – Kairi rather doubted her own suggestion.

Roxas watched them leave, eyes on Riku in particular, before adjusting Sora to support him against his chest. Fingers ran soothingly through his hair, and Roxas tried to will whatever was left of his power into Sora through his scalp. He had no way of telling whether or not his presence was doing
anything to heal him, or at least slow the bleeding or numb his pain. He had a notion that he could, but it might have been all in his head.

“Would hardly be necessary if Vexen would show himself...” Zexion muttered to himself, wronged by his absence, as he mixed some sour-smelling liquid in a bowl.

Sora's entire body quaked, but he tried to convince himself that he wasn't afraid, now that he’d made his decision. Still, he couldn't help zeroing in on Zexion's quiet, irate mumbling, fearful that the pirates might take up their normal behavior in Riku's absence. Worse yet, he was scared Riku might find a reason to stay away. That he might be kept away.

Lexaeus arrived first. He denied encountering the Captain, when Zexion asked; he’d brought Saix to his own quarters and tethered him there, a problem to be dealt with later. He'd growled and seethed, spouting nonsense, and Lexaeus had needed no more convincing that he was a danger to everyone on board.

The second time the door opened, Sora was watching it desperately. Riku almost threw it open, flocking to his side and leaving Axel in the doorway.

“I'm here.”

Though he did not tear away from Roxas, Sora still turned to put his other hand in Riku's, once more able to hear through the thrum of blood against his eardrums.

“So... You'll need me to clean up the wound?” Axel surmised. Roxas could not look at him, holding onto Sora's hand like a lifeline.

“That is essentially your purpose. You should be at the ready to be called upon if both mine and Lexaeus's hands are otherwise occupied,” Zexion confirmed, and handed the small bowl to Lexaeus. “Have him drink.”

Nodding, Lexaeus brought the bowl to him and put a hand at the back of Sora's neck.

“Gently,” Riku instructed, automatic and accusing. He only nodded again, and tipped the contents of the bowl into an open mouth.

Sora wanted to struggle – they could have been feeding him anything, and the taste was sharp and foul – but he didn't have the strength to fight off people who appeared to be helping him. He groaned through his swallows, expression wrenched.

“It will make him drowsy and dull the pain a little, but he might not sleep,” Zexion informed the room at large, then addressed Lexaeus. “I'll need you to hold him.”

“Yes.” Lexaeus moved around the surgery table, elevating the leg with care and holding firm. Though Sora might writhe, he'd be as steady as anyone could be, in Lexaeus's hands.

Riku's skin crawled with anxiety.

“No numbing? Haven't found Vexen yet?” Axel raised an eyebrow, and was regarded suspiciously.

“... No. He's made himself unusually hard to track down,” Zexion replied evenly.

“How unlike him,” he remarked.

“If you have nothing to do but stand around the make suggestions, perhaps you could head the
search for him,” Zexion replied coldly.

“And here I thought I was needed.”

No numbing. Roxas squeezed Sora's hand again, looking up at Riku and muttering, “He should have something to bite down on, shouldn't he?”

Desperately, Sora tried not to listen anymore. Riku's hand left his grasp only long enough to knot a clean cloth, winding and tying it until Sora could sink his teeth in. By the time he was finished, Sora was sagging against the bed, the room starting to drift out of focus.

“It'll be alright...” Gently, he drew Sora's jaw down to put the cloth in his mouth. If he bit down, his tongue would be protected. “We'll make sure it's alright.”

Limp and cooperative, Sora closed his teeth around it and sank into Riku. Zexion had moved on from Axel, though carried an air of displeasure.

“Be ready to transfer your blood to Sora, should he need it. He's lost a great deal already, and he'll bleed plenty more before we're done.”

Roxas went white and jerked his head. “Give me the needle now. He needs all the strength I can give him.”

Lexaeus looked to Axel, as he was unable to leave Sora in the position he was in. “There. Sterilize the needle,” he told him, and Axel took his eyes off Roxas as he set about the task.

There was only one stool, and Roxas dragged it over to sit up higher than his brother. He knew this procedure from only days ago, when his blood was needed to clear the poison from Sora's system. If he'd known he'd ever need to do it again, he only would have prayed it wouldn't be so soon.

“I love you... You'll be alright,” Riku whispered to Sora. He was slumped against him, and looked almost peaceful. Axel heating the needles to clear them of risk, Zexion slid it smoothly into Roxas's vein and waited for the blood to flow before extending it to Sora's arm. Riku saw none of it.

Intrusively, he wondered if Ansem was dead, by now.

“Can you keep hold on his arms, Captain? Don't let him rip the needle out.”

He blinked his focus back to life, and it met reality with a terrible clash. He said an affirmative, but didn't hear his own voice. Not really.

Roxas privately promised himself that he'd keep his eyes open and on Sora, but that promise broke in moments. Zexion began to saw through bone and Sora jerked to life, screaming into the gag, and Riku held him tight. His stomach lurched, he kept Sora's upper body upright, and the horrifying grating of metal through tissue mingled with the heart-wrenching, ear-splitting sobs.

It took a long time. Far too long, but probably less than it felt. Roxas did not protest when he was sent away from the sick bay, the jarring spectacle of Sora's bleeding stump being cauterized impressed upon him. The only mercy in it was that Sora had lost consciousness by that point, and the bleeding had finally stopped.
Roxas felt like he was vibrating in his skin, haunted. He was paler than he ever had been, and he didn't think it had much to do with his blood loss. His arm was wrapped at the elbow, but he didn't feel any physically weaker. He was sure that had something to do with Sora.

Even now, Sora was taking care of him far better than Roxas could.

There was only one place he could think to go, now, which he simply couldn't. Axel's quarters were the only haven he knew, but after everything that had happened... To witness his chakram tearing through Sora's leg, and Axel's fire burning the amputated limb shut... Roxas would not go there. He needed some time, and he didn't even know what would come at the end of it.

Instead of finding somewhere to rest, Roxas walked. He took familiar paths, wandering the other route he'd unconsciously mapped – the way to Marluxia's room.

He was so startled to see Namine actually there, unchained and unguarded, that he almost didn't believe his eyes. Roxas stopped dead, startled.

She was closing the door to his room, ever so gentle, for she was leaving Kairi asleep in there. It was her prison and personal hell for years, yet she hadn't been able to think of anywhere else to go when exhaustion threatened to knock them off their feet. Kairi had taken up the mantle of second-in-command seamlessly, authority delegated to her while Riku was otherwise occupied, and she'd given the orders to sail to Radiant Garden. After charting their route and holding her own in discussions with the most terrible men they'd ever known, Kairi was dead on her feet.

Namine had intended to rest with her, but found she couldn't. Not in that room, and not yet. There was still a spark of vitality left in her, it seemed, and so she slipped out.

“... Namine?”

She lifted her head, less surprised than she thought she should be. Not only by Roxas's presence, but at the overall impression he made. “Roxas... How's Sora?”

He just looked at her, unable to summon one word from all the images swirling in his mind.

“... How are you...?”

Roxas shook his head slowly. “Alive.”

“You are...” Namine said softly. “... And we won't face any more danger. It's just about recovery, now.”

It was still difficult to summon words. He started, faltered, tried to start again. “... I still don't understand what happened...”

“I can explain, for the most part.” Namine hesitated, looking away. “Would you mind if I sat down...?”

Guilt lurched through his being as comprehension snapped into place. He'd forgotten, among his own concerns, how weak she must still be.

“No, you sit... Sorry, that was stupid,” he bemoaned, and made to follow her.

“It's alright.”

The place she found to sit was only on the rocking floor, and Roxas joined her. He was dizzier than
he thought, and didn't have the strength to stand for very much longer than she.

“Are you alright?”

Namine looked almost apologetic. “If it isn't insensitive to say... I'm better than ever. Only tired.”

“It's good...” Roxas was relieved. “You had other people to count on keeping you safe...”

“I wouldn't be here, if it weren't for you,” Namine insisted. A gentle hand reached out to his arm, but the consolatory gesture only wracked him with guilt.

“I was helpless, Namine,” he expressed miserably. “I acted like their puppet, and Sora -”

“Sora did something very noble... And I think it was a large part of the reason we were saved.” Briefly, her teeth found the indents she'd chewed into her lip. “The instinct to save someone is from the heart. He was hurt... but because of what he did, you let go of the keyblade. You saved us from Xemnas.”

Roxas was quiet for a second. “... It all comes back to them, doesn't it? I held the weapon, but all the strength I had came from Sora...”

“And all of mine comes from Kairi.”

Exhaustion crept into his voice. “I still don't understand what this connection is, or why I'm different, or what I'd be without Sora... But I think I'd rather be home than know what it all means.”

“Home will always be with them,” Namine informed him softly. “There was a time... you were light. Something radiant without a body... And you must have wanted to experience humanity. To have a heart. Sora wasn't even born... and he let you share his.”

A fond smile softened his tired expression. “He's always been too nice for his own good.”

“What I wanted was not to be alone, anymore... and Kairi, as a child, gave me that. Sora makes you more human, just as Kairi makes me...” Namine's explanation trailed helplessly. “Whatever I am.”

“Seems like they deserve life much more than we do,” Roxas muttered, and with his other hand took the one Namine placed on his arm. “... But I'm glad we met.”

She started to smile. “So am I.”

For a moment, Roxas held onto her hand without intention or force, a tangible manifestation of the connection between them. He cleared his throat.

“You were going to tell me how things got like this.”

“Yes...” she nodded. “You remember, on Oblivion, I was drawing? I was taking a risk. I can draw what will come to pass, but what I'm really doing is drawing a memory that hasn't happened yet. I can draw the past just as easily. So, when Kairi came for me... I felt stronger, and thought, maybe, I could draw... new memories.”

As hard as he listened, Roxas still needed to repeat every word in his head, yet didn't follow. “New memories...?”

“No one who stayed on the Never Was remembers Xemnas. They can remember confusion, darkness... and then Riku, assembling this crew. Saix still knows the truth, but I don't think anyone will believe him once he's in the condition to talk.”
Comprehension slowly dawned, and Roxas stared at her. “You can... change people's memories like that?”

“I can. I wasn't sure I could... but I managed.”

A chill went through him. “… What will happen to our memories?”

“Nothing – they're unchanged, and will stay that way,” she answered hastily. As much as he trusted that she was telling the truth, Roxas still felt unnerved.

“That's-…” he began, but wound up shaking his head when no further words made it out of his throat.

Namine was a bit worried, now, feeling she needed to explain herself. “I only did it because I thought it was necessary.”

“It's... unbelievable. Something like that is way more powerful than anything these pirates have done.”

He raised his eyebrows when she flushed faintly, never having seen so much color in her skin. Namine wrung her hands in her lap as she weakly went on, “Like I said, I couldn't have, without Kairi. If any of them still had their hearts... there's no telling what they'd be capable of.”

So, when Xemnas had wanted to join with Ansem...

Roxas tried very hard not to think about what could have happened, if he'd failed to resist. “… Do you think there's a chance for any of them?”

Her voice lowered. “It's a slim chance, if it exists. I don't know for sure.”

“We're the lucky ones, then...”

“Very lucky,” she nodded. Roxas felt at a loss for what to say.

“Kairi... Is she alright?”

“Tired, as we all are...” Namine became troubled. “Is Riku still with Sora?”

“He is. You couldn't pry him off if you tried.” To his own grudging surprise, Roxas determined that he wouldn't be the one making such an attempt. For good or ill, Riku seemed to be what Sora needed right now, either second to or just as much as he needed Roxas. When times allowed for pettiness, he might be jealous... but for now, when they'd all suffered and struggled together, he closed himself off to envy.

“We'll have to get him, eventually. He'll exhaust himself,” Namine fretted. “You should rest now, too...”

“I don't know where to go, now,” he confessed.

“Not Axel's quarters...?”

Roxas avoided her eye. “I can't go there now. Not yet.”

“Because of what he did to Sora?”

“Because of... all of it. I don't what to think, or what to do -”
“Do you love him?”

Roxas’s head lifted, startled, and stared at her. She simply awaited an answer, and it took him moments to clear his surprise and give his answer thought. “... I honestly don't know how to answer that.”

“I don't think Axel would know how to respond if I asked the same about you,” Namine confided.

“He'd say it was impossible,” Roxas hesitated, “and he'd probably be right.”

“After all we’ve been through... I'm not so sure anything's impossible.”

For some time, Roxas tried to find the words he wanted. Could he love Axel? As much as he felt... Roxas wasn't sure any emotion really worked the way they once had. And Axel... he was a thief, a kidnapper, a murderer and a pirate. He'd committed monstrous acts, and both Roxas and Sora could be counted among his victims. He lacked a heart, and acted it when he was at his cruelest.

But he was like fire, in that way, which only made sense. Axel was destruction, but warmer than anything or anyone Roxas had ever known. Illogically, he'd put all his stock in Roxas... Put himself at great risk, without either a second thought or regret. He seemed frustrated by his own lack of understanding, craved the one thing that would instill an independent conscience in him, and...

Those eyes. They didn't just glow, when they looked at Roxas. They lit up, like they saw something in him that affected the core of his being.

“If it was...” he ventured slowly, “Do you think it's possible to love someone, but hate things they've done?”

“Maybe. There's a lot I don't know, and love is complicated.” In a small span of silence, Namine considered. “Axel has done terrible things, and he is not a good person. Axel isn’t a person – not even like you or I aren't, because we have Sora and Kairi. But, I think... he does feel for you, and that's enough to inspire him to try to be. I think that you’re allowed to love someone for the potential you see in them... and that Axel could be good, one day, as long as he keeps wanting to be.”

“I don't know what he's going to want, after this...” Roxas's mind went to Saix, and once again he was locked in a struggle with himself to understand why Axel had brought him back.

“... I just hope that he isn't the last danger we have to face.”

Roxas was almost stricken by the idea. “It depends how good his word is...”

“I'll say this...” she pondered. “I have a lot more faith in him, after all he did to save us.”

Perhaps he would have thought the same, but if there was one part of Axel he was familiar with, beyond any shadow of doubt, it was his greed. As delicately as he could, he warned, “If he takes it back, in the end... If he stops me from leaving, I want you all to go.”

Namine's eyes widened in alarm. “Roxas...”

“I'm serious. Don't try to fight back, just get yourself home safely,” he insisted. Namine's face fell.

“I couldn't...” More fiercely, she wrung her hands. “Riku wouldn't allow it, and Sora -”

“You gave them all this chance, and maybe it's the only one,” he interrupted firmly. “If all of us are captives again, I don't think we'd survive another rescue. And Sora... he'll make it okay. He's got
Riku. Kairi was pretty incredible, too...

Namine took his hand tightly.

“Promise me, Namine?”

“...I promise. But I don't think this ship will leave with you on it.”

Roxas gave her an odd look. Her wording sat with him oddly, and he wondered if she'd already drawn what was to come. Her worry was genuine, though, and she betrayed nothing else.

“It'll be alright,” she murmured.

“You're probably the only person I'll believe that from.”

Her lips tilted in a soft smile, again, though her brow was still knit with unshakable concern. “I think you should find somewhere to rest, now. Larxene had her quarters somewhere near here, if you'd like to borrow them...”

He began to climb to his feet. “Sure,” he agreed, but a glance at the nearest door unsettled him. “Are you really staying in Marluxia's again...?”

“I'm alright. It isn't for much longer,” Namine claimed, and hoped that by saying it enough, she'd make it true. She managed to sound sure enough of herself to settle the matter, but Roxas still had to fight down a shiver at the thought of her having to stay in that place.

“Company helps, I guess.”

“I can face anything, with Kairi nearby.”

He believed that with more ease, and was pleased to hear her say so. “I'll let you get back to her.”

“I should check on her, yes...” Namine braced herself on the wall to get up. “Sleep well, Roxas.”

Sora would have pulled her in for a hug at a time like this, Roxas reflected, but that didn't seem like the right fit for either of them. Instead he took her hand, and squeezed it once. She smiled, and he knew that had been the right way to see her off.

His thoughts were still cycling when he found Larxene's abandoned room, and could not even work himself to be disturbed by the tomb-like quality it possessed. He sank onto the cot, and waited for sleep to take him.

Riku would not leave Sora's side for anything. He knew their course had been set, and as such, no one needed anything more from him. The crew had been instructed to give him peace and handle matters according to rank, leaving him to keep a vigilant eye on Sora. He had never been more exhausted in his life, but his attention did not wane for it. Instead, it kept him skittish, monitoring for even a suggestion that Sora was fading.

It had been quite long enough, though, and Kairi awoke with concern after hours. Namine had recovered a little – more by her proximity than actual rest – and the two of them decided that a check-in was in order. Kairi scarcely let go of Namine on their way to rouse Roxas, and kept their
fingers laced on their way down to the sick bay. The knuckles of her free hand met the door.

In the midst of dabbing Sora's brow with a cloth, Riku did not look up, and his response was almost too quiet to hear. “Come in.”

The creak of the door stretched seconds-long, and Kairi poked her head in first, as hushed as though she was trying not to wake a sleeping infant. “How is he...?”

Namine peered past her, looking upon the wound. Evidence of the cauterization had been covered by bandages, wrapping up the stump and working all the way up over the right knee. Kairi's eyes only lingered over it for a second, returning to Riku's face and taking in the lines.

Still the youngest Captain in history, yet he looked so very old.

“He's body's been through... so much,” Riku answered, a little numbly. The whipping and fever, when they'd first met... Dark Thorn, and now this.

“They said he would likely recover, though,” Kairi tried to encourage him. Herself, too, in truth.

“I know.” Riku could not take his eyes off his face. “Roxas's blood helped.”

Kairi released Namine's hand to sit by his side. “You should really get some rest. There's still more than a day's journey to the kingdom...”

Namine held onto the door, knuckles white against it. “I know it's grim, but the Captain's quarters are available to you. You really ought to lie down, sleep if you can...”

“... I don't think I could if I tried.”

“If you could rest at least...” Kairi coaxed, and reached for his hand. Riku twitched badly at the first brush of her fingers, jarring them both, and he glanced away as though guilty.

Something squirmed uncomfortably in Namine's chest. “Riku...”

Kairi drew her hand back, and chose not to comment. “About what happened...”

“... With Ansem?” Riku supplied. She tried not to flinch, herself.

“Yes... with Ansem. If you're ready to talk about it...”

Tone measured, Riku replied, “He's dead, now... There isn't anything more to say about him.”

“The fact that we left him to die means there's more to say than ever,” Namine contradicted.

Quiet and gentle, Kairi tried prompting again, “I think we should talk somewhere else...”

“... If I leave -”

“You don't have to leave him alone,” Namine reassured him.

“Roxas is coming to keep a watch over him,” Kairi nodded, trying to catch Riku's eye. “Honestly, I think he'd like the time alone with him.”

It was apparent he was fighting a losing battle. Riku sighed, feeling as though parting with Sora was the worst thing he could do, but reluctantly drew away. “Very well.”
They only waited long enough for Roxas to arrive. He'd cleaned himself up as best he could, but there was still blood flecked over his clothes and bags under his eyes. Nonetheless, he'd been adamant about taking up the post, and Riku was all but pressed out the door.

As they walked, Kairi did not reach out to touch him again. They walked in silence and Riku's feet guided him without paying nearly enough attention, only led in any direction at all thanks to Namine's subtle lead.

He hadn't stopped thinking, throughout the whole surgery and Sora's sleep, that he could have saved his leg. Sora might not have been wounded at all, if only he'd killed Ansem sooner.

If Riku had walked in and immediately taken the sword to Ansem's throat, the scene would not have played out the same way. On their way, he'd had no inclinations to kill Ansem, hadn't even fathomed it as an option... but that was exactly what he'd wound up doing. If he'd just done it sooner... No, Riku was the worst kind of murderer, one too fearful and pathetic to take the life with his own hand. He'd walked away, and Ansem was dead, and Sora...

Sora had nearly died, for which Riku could take full credit as well. All he'd ever done was endanger him.

Namine opened the door to Xemnas's quarters, tentative in doing so. Kairi watched Riku very closely, for they'd both noticed that the decor was unmistakably similar to Ansem's tastes.

He was impassive. Slowly, he approached the bed and wrapped a hand around the post. “It was uncanny, how similar they could be.”

“They were like me and Namine,” Kairi observed, “or Sora and Roxas... but not quite.”

Behind them, Namine carefully sank into a seat, legs still too weak to support her for too long. Years of being bound to a chair and left to crouch in corners had atrophied the muscles, and she'd have to rebuild her strength slowly. Kairi closed the door.

“I don't regret leaving him.”

It was such a bold and unprompted declaration that Kairi couldn't come up with a response. Riku didn't look at either of them when he confessed it, still clenching the bedpost.

“Was it out of anger, or something else?” Namine questioned gently.

“Of course I was angry. After all he did to Sora...” Riku lifted his head towards Kairi, “...and to you...”

“... But there was more to it than that, wasn't there?” Kairi ventured.

His gaze sought anything and everything that wasn't one of the women in the room, and he spoke with a weary rasp. “He lied to me for years. For my entire life. He made me...” Riku choked back the words that nearly came out of his mouth. “... weak.”

Kairi had experienced a crawling feeling up her spine every time she thought of Riku and Ansem together, as of late, and couldn't have explained it if she tried. It squirmed up through her back again, at his words, and it was no more clear to her why than it was before. “Whatever he made you, you're strong now. And that's all your own.”

“... If I'd been any **stronger**, I would have saved Sora. I would have killed Ansem, myself...”
“Whatever he was, and whatever he did, you still had a connection to Ansem,” Namine stressed. “You can’t blame yourself for not acting in accordance with what you know now.”

“None of us knew what to do... but we got each other out,” Kairi agreed. “Sora's alive... he'll be alright.”

At last, Riku began to sink onto the bed. His shoulders slumped, proud posture leaving him, and he muttered, “Is it strange, that I wonder if he's really dead?”

Kairi glanced down at the floor. “It's not strange at all. You didn't see it happen, it would be difficult not to wonder...”

“I can't see how he possibly could have survived, though. The entire island was consumed by Nothing... I don't think it exists, anymore.” There was a long beat in which nobody spoke, until Namine went on. “Even if he's alive, he's done. He won't be coming back.”

“... That's a good thing,” Riku said, and tried to believe it. At the same time, with every fiber of his being, he felt it as truth.

With all the sensitivity she had, Kairi murmured, “I think it's a good thing for you.”

He nodded slowly. Guilt was still eating away at him. “… But Sora. He risked his life to save Ansem, and I--...”

When he didn't continue, Namine spoke carefully. “I don't think he will regret Ansem's death, either.”

“The Sora I know would jump in front of a weapon to save anyone,” Kairi sighed softly, equal parts proud and exasperated.

“That it was Ansem... It didn't mean anything. Only that Sora is a good person.”

“He is...” Riku rasped, and he was in a similar boat to Kairi. Proud, loving, but his frustration ran deeper. He was almost angry with him, an ugly bitter part of him reprimanding Sora and calling him a fool, but he knew that wasn't true. Sora was just... “Better than I am...”

“I don't think so... Only a different sort of good,” Kairi disagreed.

Riku only shook his head, and didn't pursue the topic, lest Kairi start listing reasons her argument was credible. “… Have you thought about what you'll do, when we reach the Kingdom? How do we explain... everything?”

With a sigh, Kairi sat next to him on the bed. “If we tell the full story, the people might think we've lost our minds... But I will tell--...” she stopped short of saying 'my parents', “… who­ever will listen, that Ansem was killed by the pirates and that Sora lost his leg trying to save him.”

“Yes... People should know,” Riku nodded once. “Recognize what he did.”

“Sora can have a life, there... And I'm certain Roxas will stay,” Namine said.

“I can ensure both Sora and Roxas will have a place to live and work in Radiant Garden, if that's what they want.”

“Thank you.” Riku gave Kairi a fleeting look of gratitude, his gaze falling to the floor. He stared at it, dragging a hand through his hair.
Hesitantly, Kairi inquired, “Do you still want the kingdom to know about what Ansem has done...?”

“That should be up to you, and Sora. He'd be defamed... and I don't know what would be worse for the Kingdom. The truth might demoralize our people even more... But keeping it quiet...”

“It will affect you most. If he dies a military hero, you'll be expected to attend every ceremony, give speeches...”

Namine chipped in with the other side of the coin. “And if he's disgraced, there may be more expectations put on you, and rumors will start to spread.”

“... I don't know if I could stand either,” Riku muttered.

“If we only confide in higher ranking officials, it's possible we could keep it quiet,” Kairi thought aloud. “A small ceremony to acknowledge his service, and work to replace him as quickly as possible.”

“How? After the siege on Radiant Garden and sinking of the Hollow Bastion, there's hardly anyone of appropriate rank left.”

“... There's you,” Namine reminded him.

“We...” Kairi swallowed down the lump threatening to form in her throat. “We don't know who is left, and it will take time to call in allies from other kingdoms and train new soldiers. I could recommend you for interim Admiral, or... appoint you, depending on my position when we return.”

They may as well have struck Riku over the head. “... I haven't even held my rank as Captain for two years.”

“You may still be the most qualified to serve as acting Admiral for the Kingdom,” Namine pointed out.

“It would certainly cause a stir, even in the current state of things...” Kairi's words gained speed. “It might be enough to distract from the news of Ansem's death... This could work.”

Riku almost pulled at his hair as he considered. Admiral was a hefty promotion, and one he honestly didn't think he deserved. He'd failed the entire crew of the Highwind, let down the people he loved... He'd had very little bearing on the victories they'd had, and could attribute too many losses to his name.

Still, selfishly, the diversion from Ansem's death had appeal. And... he would try. He'd do his best, and find ways of making that better.

“I would accept, if you really think it'd be best for the Kingdom.”

“It would put you in the public eye a great deal, and Sora, too,” Kairi cautioned, glancing at Namine. “All of us could be.”

Almost imperceptibly, Namine nodded.

“We fought the Never Was and lived,” Riku asserted. “We already will be.”

Kairi's eyes lowered. All she wanted upon their return was to have Namine to herself, at last, in privacy and in safety. “I suppose that's true...”

“... Whatever we do, it will be what's best for the Kingdom,” Riku determined.
Namine folded her hands in her lap. “And we'll do it together.”

As much as she didn't want to ruin the hopeful moment, Kairi was only able to keep silent for a short while. “We'll have to decide what's to be done with the remaining pirates...”

Riku's utterance was immediate. “Prison. I don't know if regular cells will contain them, but they can't be allowed to run rampant.”

“Of course not, but do we even have the means to take them prisoner?” Kairi asked anxiously. “They think you're their Captain now, but they won't simply submit to being put in chains...”

“I may have to play them off each other... Get Axel and some others to detain the pirates...”

“Can we be sure he'll do that...?”

“I don't know,” he confessed.

Kairi nibbled her lip. “I suppose we don't have any other choice, though...”

“We have to try. I'm in a position to do something – I have to try.”

“You're right...”

Namine interjected, “But to keep that position, you need to get some proper rest.”

Riku appeared chastened. “I suppose you're right about that.”

“Sora will never be alone while you're sleeping, we promise,” Kairi told him, getting to her feet in a subtle indication that he should take up more space on the bed.

It took Riku a second to remember that he trusted Kairi and Namine more than just about anyone, and that his paranoia spoke lies. “I appreciate that,” he exhaled. “If he needs me...”

“We'll wake you, then,” Namine confirmed. He relaxed a little.

“We can leave other matters until after you've rested,” Kairi decided, going to offer a hand to Namine. Part of her wondered, now, if all of what they'd discussed meant they wouldn't be rushing a wedding, but now wasn't the time to discuss it.

She didn't think she'd mind, one way or the other.

“Right, there's a lot to discuss...” Riku bent to unlace his boots.

Namine took her offered hand, and Kairi considered kissing him in parting. It would have meant nothing more than affection and certainly wouldn't have been the first time, but she didn't think he'd be comfortable with it at the moment.

She instead bade him a good night's sleep, and walked out of the Captain's quarters with her hand in Namine's again. Kairi shut the door almost soundlessly.

“... Do you think he'll be alright?” Namine questioned, hoping Kairi's scope for the state of his well-being was better than her own. It had been too many years, and they'd made her uncertain.

“He will be when Sora is,” she answered with a light sigh.

“And will Sora be, again? His leg...”
“Sora's recovered from things no one would have expected... He'll find a way to keep going.”

Kairi had a remarkable ability to come across as confident, even when Namine knew she wasn't. She sounded sure of Sora, though, and Namine had never known her faith to be misplaced.

“... And you?” Namine tilted her head slightly, studying Kairi's profile in lamplight.

“I-... I just have to keep looking ahead. And plan.”

“I'll help you,” she professed. “Every step of the way, I'm going to be with you.”

Kairi's smile was tired, but no less genuine. “That's all I need.”

“Is there anything you need, right now?”

She was quiet for a moment. “There is something I'd like to do, now that we have a little time to breathe...”

“Anything,” Namine agreed instantly.

“We'll need some of your paper...”

There was a nervous little flip of her stomach when she recalled where it was, but Namine didn't hesitate. “Saix's room... Follow me.”

They kept as quick a pace as shaky legs allowed, going down to Saix's quarters with futile hopes he might be elsewhere. When Namine cracked open the door, though, she wasn't really surprised to see him in a drug-induced sleep, tied to his own bed.

In the corner of the room was an abandoned stack of blank pages. Kairi froze in the doorway, and Namine slipped from her grasp. The separation changed them both, fear prevalent and lodging in the uncertain place left behind by the break.

“Please hurry,” Kairi whispered, keeping an eye on Saix as Namine knelt down to gather up her papers. Their rustling seemed twice as loud, and Kairi could have sworn she saw one of those slightly-pointed ears twitch. Namine came back to her as fast as she could, pages a disorganized heap in her hands.

“The door...”

Nodding mutely, Kairi closed it behind them with the utmost care, and the two of them managed to breathe again.

“... Did you want to be somewhere private?” Namine asked, vaguely winded.

“If there's somewhere we can go...”

“Follow me.”

It wasn't the first time they'd been in Marluxia's room even that day, but Namine was no less nervous about it. She had not told Kairi what that room had once been, to her, and her skittishness had been attributed to restlessness when sleep proved elusive. To Namine's dismay, however, the candle they'd lit much earlier had done out, and the unfriendly darkness greeted her with a malicious grin.

“... One moment,” she requested, and pressed Kairi back a step before bustling into the room. The pages were placed on the mattress and she sought a match for the lantern, which would provide
better light than a stubby stick of wax anyway.

Even without their connection, Kairi could have felt something different about Namine within the pirate quarters. She watched her fumble with the match box, biting back offers of help.

Namine didn't want Kairi to be in the darkness. Not here. Resolutely avoiding even a glance in the direction of her old chair, she managed to strike up a flame and lit the lantern, flicking out the matchstick before it could burn down to her fingers. She quickly set about rubbing her arms, flesh prickling, and Kairi stepped inside to take over the task of warming them. The chill came from inside her skin rather than out, but all the same, Namine was grateful.

Gradually, Kairi drew her into her arms and Namine sank against her, head coming to rest against her shoulder. Every breath was even, conscious of the air being drawn in and back out, and Kairi let her feel the normalcy of her heartbeat when it calmed. There was a moment in which the serenity threatened to shatter as Namine tensed, comparing the warmth of the real-life Kairi to Marluxia's flowery imitation. She remembered being pricked with thorns until she bled, and closed her eyes to focus on Kairi's softness instead.

All Kairi could think to soothe her with was an old lullaby from their childhood, humming it and drifting her hand up and down her back in time. Breathing in, breathing out, and Namine soaked up the comfort like sunshine. Not a single touch was harsh or pressed for more, even as Kairi gently nuzzled her hair.

It was so easy to remember the swell of their shared heart, the wash ofrightness and love that had settled over them both since the first time they'd met.

“I don't think I could bear being apart from you again,” Namine murmured into her neck.

“Don't think about that now... We won't have to be apart again.” Kairi spoke, in part, to herself. “No one can take you away from me again... I don't care if I never get married or you never get married... I don't care what anyone says about us or who asks questions...”

With a minute nod, Namine laughed. A tinkling little sound, Kairi's favorite. “You're going to be Queen... You still have to be married.”

“Should I decree that you can be my bride?” Kairi teased. Namine lifted her head, smile small but bright.

“I'd love that... but I don't think we'd produce many heirs.”

“Hm... You're right, as usual.”

Namine drew her towards the bed to sit, one hand gathering up the papers to avoid creasing them. “... But I have no desire to marry, and as long as you don't declare a need for me to... I don't think you'd be questioned too deeply on the matter.”

With an adoring smile, Kairi sat next to her. She didn't lose the contact between them again, almost feeling as though they still weren't close enough. “There should be years yet before we have to decide to whom I'll be married.”

“But it really should be Riku,” Namine encouraged knowingly. “He'll be a hero, when we return... It's a smart match. And he won't mind... us.”

“I know... Of course I would choose Riku above anyone else I could have, and he knows this,” Kairi said, absentmindedly playing with Namine's fingers. “But I haven't been able to bring up the matter
with Sora. I couldn't do it against his wishes.”

Namine nodded. “You've grown very close to him.”

“Once you know him, it's hard not to love him,” Kairi grinned.

“I don't doubt it – I'm already grateful to him.”

“And Roxas is the same for you...?” Kairi suggested.

“Not exactly.” In turn, Namine had started to fiddle with Kairi's hand, almost admiring of the calluses she'd developed on the pads of her fingers and palms. “He's the first friend I've had in... a very long time.”

Watching their joined hands, Kairi nodded, allowing her to go on.

“I feel a strong connection to him. He helped me find hope.” Namine paused, not sure she should admit something, but could not keep anything from Kairi. “I'd almost given up.”

“Then I'm very grateful to him.”

“So am I...”

Leaning closer, Kairi kissed Namine's forehead and lingered with her lips against her hair. Her former reservations about the room had almost left her, all the factors of her situation coming into play; Namine had not yet left the reality of the Never Was, and as long as Kairi was with her, it all felt vaguely like a dream. Like something that could not touch her, or at least do her any harm she did not expect.

Once the feeling in her chest eased a little again, Kairi drew herself away, but it was really only a scant distance she'd put between them. “There's still something I need to do, and I'd like your help...”

“What do you need?” Namine arranged the papers in her lap.

“I want to...” With a breath to steady herself, Kairi at last let herself think about it. She'd been denying herself even a moment to reflect, until now. “I want you to write down all the names of the men who were lost on the Highwind and the Hollow Bastion. I'll tell you what they are, but I feel like... I'm not sure, but it seems to me that if you write them, they're certain to be remembered.”

Sadness colored Namine's soft smile, seeping through from Kairi, and summoning her own grief from memory. “I'll do that.”

“Thank you,” Kairi murmured, and her voice came out much quieter than she'd expected. As Namine looked for a quill to use, rather than the thin coals she used to draw, Kairi began to run through the names listed in her head. Choking sadness came with each one.

She recited when Namine was ready, and every letter was given meticulous importance. Kairi hated that this was all she could do for them now, but all the same, the weight on her chest seemed to lighten with every name preserved in ink.

At least an hour had passed since Roxas had taken over watching Sora, and he had done little else
but stare in silence. His eyes occasionally wandered to what was left of his leg, but something indescribable seized painfully in his chest whenever he dared. With no solid grasp on the time, a knock on the door was especially startling. He raised his head sharply, already guessing at who it could be. Zexion, perhaps, to do maintenance on the wound... or Riku, possibly having given up on sleep.

“Who is it...?”

“... It's me.”

He'd almost expected to find Riku, instead, but it was a relief to find exactly who he wanted to see. It took more than a few hours for even a monster to heal broken ribs, but all the same, Axel thought he'd rested off most of the pain. In those hours, he'd done nothing but dwell obsessively on Roxas and Sora, and his decision to go wandering towards sick bay – as though just happening upon it – was in no small way influenced by that.

Roxas thought his tongue might have frozen in his mouth. He seemed to lose the power of speech every time Axel was nearby, and to worsen his predicament, his silence had been interpreted as an invitation. Axel opened the door, eyes landing on Sora first.

It was just as well. Roxas's eyes were fixed upon Sora, too.

“How has he been...?”

Struggling to say something, Roxas made a few false starts before croaking, “Quiet.”

“... I didn't intend to--... I warned him,” Axel glanced at him, and felt the irresistible compulsion to explain himself. He couldn't apologize; Axel didn't have the capacity to mean it, but something had to do in its place. “I aimed for the Admiral, it would have put an end to things.”

“I know,” he replied simply.

“I was told he'll survive.”

“He will.”

“So there's no doubt he'll follow the Captain and Princess to Radiant Garden, live a full and happy human life...” Axel gravitated towards the wall and leaned into it carefully, keeping pressure off his ribs.

“I guess so.” Finally, he managed to tear his eyes away and turn in Axel's direction, though Roxas couldn't yet look him in the face. He took on a colder tone, asking what his mind had come back to repeatedly with no better understanding. “How's Saix?”

“Tied down. Sedated. He came to with his fangs already bared... Lucky thing I already had him strapped to his bed.”

That answered nothing, and Roxas delved straight for the point. “Why did you bring him back?”

Axel's brow furrowed. “If I didn't, he'd have dissolved with the rest of Oblivion.”

“He was going to kill us.”

“Out of loyalty to Xemnas. All Saix cared about was regaining a heart, and I'm no different from him. I just happen to be loyal to someone else,” Axel gave him a significant look. “So I chose not to
let him die there.”

Even though he'd been the one to bring it up, Roxas was far too tired to carry on the conversation if it meant arguing Axel's reasoning. He'd already decided that was an exercise in futility. “What are you going to do with him, if you won't kill him?”

“Maroon him on some spit of rock, most likely. He'll have a chance of survival,” Axel shrugged, and cringed. The shift twinged. “Or he'll lose his wits and die, but not because I left him to it.”

“You know, that sounds almost sentimental of you.”

“He was once the only person on this ship I'd call a friend. Maybe it is sentiment.”

“I don't see how he deserves it, but I can't stop you.”

Axel smirked faintly. “If you'd ever been marooned, you'd know it's no mercy.”

“It's more of a chance than he'd give any of us. Or you,” Roxas fired back.

“There wasn't much time to think,” he defended himself. “I had two options in front of me, and I decided on a whim. Instinct, maybe.”

“You never let anything go,” Roxas muttered, almost under his breath.

“I let you go. Back there. You had a choice to make, between indulging me and perhaps hoping I'd one day see the error of my ways... or him.”

“There wasn't a choice,” Roxas denied quietly. “Sora would have died if I'd done any differently.”

“You make it sound as though it'd have been a difficult decision, otherwise.”

He went silent.

“... Roxas?”

“What is it you want me to say...?” Roxas's shoulders hunched slightly, gaze a little closer to the floor.

“That you know you're making the right decision?” Axel's head tilted back, resting against the wall. “That you won't let me kidnap you and sail away with you tied to my bed?”

He tensed. “That isn't funny.”

“No, it isn't,” Axel agreed.

“... I can't have you and Sora together. I've always known that.”

Axel nodded, suggesting in the slow sort of drawl adopted by those who joked about a lost cause. “Unless you both wanted to become pirates. I'm sure Sora would come 'round.”

Roxas's laugh was bitter. It tugged at something, but as usual, Axel couldn't identify what. It was even harder now to even recognize whether or not he'd experienced anything, at all.

“... I didn't realize this would be hard for you,” he admitted, at something of a loss.

“Neither did I.” Roxas looked down at Sora. “I know I can't stay here... This is what involving
ourselves with pirates has cost..."

“... But... if you could... you'd want me.”

Lifting his head again, Roxas gave him a strange look. “What else could I be after?”

“That locked chest in my room?” Axel suggested with a lacking grin.

“Lost it's appeal once I found out treasure isn't what you're hunting.”

The attempted smile faded. “Who knows what I'll hunt, now...”

There was something different, about his eyes. Roxas hadn't been able to see it, at first, for all the avoidance of them he'd been doing. Now that he was looking, though, it was distinct.

He looked lost. It was like Axel was seeing his surroundings for the first time – seeing Roxas for the first time, and there was confusion in the yearning.

“You've still got a heart to find,” Roxas reminded him quietly.

“No, I don't,” Axel sighed. “It's with you.”

He watched as Roxas shook his head, pushed himself carefully to his feet. He dragged his eyes up from the ground, looking into Axel's properly, as he made his slow approach. “My heart... it has to be with Sora. Yours is out there for you to find, but I don't think you ever would if I stayed.”

Axel drew Roxas to him, once he was close enough. “Give yourself more credit. You stole it without even meaning to,” he smirked. “You're a very skilled pirate.”

“You managed to make something stolen want to stay caught. I'm not sure what that makes you.” Though he didn't resist, Roxas didn't allow himself to be caught up in his flirtation. “But I'm a distraction. What we do... it's not a substitute for real feeling. And if we let ourselves be content with that, we'd destroy each other in the end...”

Axel listened, and toyed with Roxas's hair. “You're not wrong.”

His gaze dropped again, and Roxas pulled himself a little closer, mumbling into his chest. “Wonder if I'll ever feel this warm again...”

Axel lurched away from the wall to wrap around him tightly, ribs impacted by movement, and he couldn't have cared less. Stunned for all of a moment, Roxas’s arms settled around Axel, but he didn't have the energy to hold on with the same desperation.

That sensation was there, in Axel's chest, and he closed his eyes to focus on it. It was bitter, but good. He wished that made any sort of sense, but as he understood it, feelings often didn't.

He just knew that he didn't want to let go for anything, but he was going to have to.

“Maybe I should've taken your leg off the first day we met,” Roxas spoke into his chest, again. “This'd feel a lot more fair.”

Axel laughed shortly. “A souvenir?”

“Right,” he agreed, smiling slightly.

“I'd give you something else.”
Lifting his head, Roxas made a questioning sound in lieu of asking for clarification.

“I can't have you forgetting me. What would you want?”

To his own embarrassed surprise, Roxas really didn't have to ruminate on it for very long. “… You could leave a burn on me, one last time...”

Fingers brushed his cheek, skimming down towards his jaw. “Where?”

“Where do you want me reminded of you?”

He half-expected a perverse answer and a purr, but instead Axel unwound himself and kissed him, his hand still moving downwards. Returning it fleetingly, Roxas left plenty of opportunity for either one of them to pull away and say something. Axel gently tugged his shirt to slide his hand up under it, placing it on his chest where his heartbeat should be.

To his mild surprise, he thought he could feel a very distant thrum. Roxas felt like the small fluttering sensation was coming from Axel's fingers.

The smallest of nods broke their kiss, and Axel breathed him in. His fingertips heated up first.

It would take a moment for the heat to become pain, and Roxas would have to endure for the mark to really last. He closed his eyes, Axel's now palm flush to his skin and his lips providing a distraction. Roxas tilted his head up high to meet the contact, his skin searing, and he pressed into both more urgently. Even as the kiss gained momentum, neither one deepened it; it was the pressure and familiarity Roxas wanted from his mouth, especially as the heat built up and the burn was intense, now.

“Mmn-...” Roxas grabbed both of Axel's arms and squeezed tight, the pain jarring in just the way he needed. He'd started to pant against his lips, groaning, and Axel couldn't tell whether he was reveling in his grip or his moans more.

The heat began to recede, but Axel didn't yet move a single finger. Without the adrenaline to hold him up, Roxas buckled, and had to be caught by the waist. For a few dizzying seconds, Axel held him, and Roxas thought he could still feel his hand even as it was slowly lifted away. The connection dwindled until he'd taken the hand far enough away and Roxas was left breathing low and quick.

“There,” Axel murmured, exhale full-bodied – and once more, his ribs protested, and he did not care.

Roxas held onto the feeling in brief silence, the burn mark now a little cold but the rest of him buzzing and warm. Finally, he looked up and asked, “What should I give to you...?”

“You've given me more than enough. No other treasure will ever compare,” Axel sighed, as though displeased by that truth.

“Then maybe I should take something.”

“Greedy,” Axel accused without malice. “Take what?”

“I remember a pendant I liked... it would sit nicely on the mark you just gave me,” Roxas coaxed, and hoped the tone he'd adopted was alluring as he knew he could make it. His thoughts were still a little thick with the rush he'd experienced, still feeling the pain in the strangest, numbest way.

Axel laughed. “I remember the one. I think I'll miss your boldness the most.”
Roxas managed to smirk. “I doubt I'll ever enjoy stealing from someone more.”

Lifting his chin with one slender finger, Axel regarded him a cool grin and said, “I'll think about it.”

He gave into Axel, then, when his jaw was tilted. Roxas's eyes slipped briefly closed, lips soft and parted, and Axel thought he might steal another kiss. Instead, he slipped away, backing towards the door. Eyes re-opening, Roxas made no move to follow.

“You should get some rest yourself, you know,” Axel advised.

“I'll be alright,” Roxas declined, glancing back at the bed. “I think Sora gives me more strength than sleep would.”

“Uncanny...” Axel's eyes slid towards him, as well. They were both staring at his leg.

“It's more strange than it should be... Having part of us that won't be the same, anymore...” Roxas spoke quietly, and Axel couldn't fathom a response. It was just as well, for Roxas hadn't had somewhere to go with his statement, but saying it aloud loosened something that had been taut only seconds ago.

“... You've always been different, as far as I'm concerned.”

“I expect we have.”

Axel went to get the door. “He'll be alright. You both will be.”

Roxas nodded, looking to Axel once more and saying, not harshly, “You'll survive.”

He could think of nothing more comforting to say. Axel flashed him the briefest grin.

“Always do.”

He let the door's own heaviness swing it closed, in his wake. Roxas returned to sit on the bed with his brother, and slowly pressed his fingers to the burn until it hurt.

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Sora's care continued to change hands, primarily between Roxas and Riku, and in time his stirring had become a regular occurrence. Pain always knocked him flat again within moments, and they'd both learned not to hope for conversation or the like out of him.

Riku only rested as long as he could stand before taking up the vigil by his bedside again. He sometimes checked around the ship, but it was only a pretense to keep anyone from claiming he needed to spend less time fretting.

He just wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he wasn't there, if – when – Sora came to.

When he breathed in deeply with a miserable groan, Riku didn't actually expect it to be any different from the other times he'd roused. Leaning on his elbows, he gingerly rubbed circles against Sora's hand with his thumbs and sat up a little at his sound.

A nauseating wave of pain reached through Sora's swelling consciousness, but the touch against his hand was startling soft and doing much to ground him. He was finding his way back to reality
through that touch, eyelids fluttering, and Riku watched with mixed feelings.

He hoped he'd wake... but he wanted him to rest.

Squinting, Sora took his time opening his eyes in the hopes that the room would stop swaying. It was rocking far too violently to simply be the movement of the ship.

“Mm...?”

“... You're awake,” Riku declared, no louder than a whisper. His relief lasted only a moment. “But you should keep resting, you need to recover... Don't force it.”

He couldn't bring him into focus right away, but Sora knew that voice. “Riku...?” he rattled, hardly sounding like himself. His throat was raw from screaming, and dry from sleep.

“I'm here... Water?”

“Please,” Sora breathed, and closed his eyes again. Riku stood to get a canteen, hands slipping away.

“... They're all safe. Kairi, Namine, Roxas.”

Sora was almost too shaky to register relief.

“The pirates – they won't hurt us, and we'll reach Radiant Garden soon. We'll get you all the care you need... Here...” Riku sank next to him, unscrewing the cap and bringing water to his lips. Sora forced his eyes open, and craned his neck up to drink deeply.

Already, Riku was getting horrible visions of him choking. He aided as best he could, muttering, “Everything you did... You're too good, Sora. I hope you realize that.”

He honestly didn't know if he was praising or condemning him. It ceased to matter when Sora stopped drinking, turning his head abruptly when it felt like he wouldn't keep the water down. Riku took the flask away, anxiously intent on him.

After a few tense moments, Sora managed to overcome the feeling with his eyes squeezed shut.

“... How do you feel?”

“Dizzy...” he mumbled, lying back again slowly and reopening his eyes. This time he brought Riku's face into focus, though, and Sora managed to smile.

“That...” Riku gently smoothed his wild hair back, away from his eyes, and trailed off lamely. “Yes, that makes sense.”

Though still a weak, ruined rasp, but Sora's voice was inflected with all the affection it could carry. “Why do I always end up seeing you like this?”

“We shouldn't make such a habit of it...” Riku almost managed a laugh, and Sora's smile was feeble but lingering.

“Riku... I want to sit up.”

Promptly, he arranged himself to help Sora. “Not too fast.”

Leaning heavily onto Riku, both of Sora's legs moved automatically to plant his feet on the bed and anchor himself up. The result was catastrophic. Riku frantically caught him, a cry leaving Sora's
ragged throat as both slid back to the bed and he reached to climb Riku with his hands instead.

Riku's heart pounded. “Are you alright?”

“Want to sit up,” Sora repeated with determination.

“... I've got you. Come on...”

Dragging himself backwards up the bed, Sora wrapped his arms around Riku's neck and managed to sit in a reclined position. It took several attempts, and Riku was almost able to hear Ansem whispering into his ear that this was all his fault.

He was determined not to sound pained. He had no right – Sora was the one suffering. “Is this better?”

“Yes...” Sora didn't work himself up, or even prepare for the moment. He unceremoniously tilted his head forward to look down at his body, and Riku fell silent. There was nothing to say.

What remained of his right leg was heavily bandaged. Riku had feared that burning the wound closed would have more severe repercussions than a longer route of closing off the stump, but Zexion had claimed there were no other means available on the Never Was. Additionally, he'd added, burns were something of a specialty treatment, and it made sense given the amount of in-fighting Riku had seen during his short stay alone. Sora's bandages were fresh, and the burn well-tended to. That was the best of what there was to say.

Sora was uncharacteristically quiet as he took in his now-unfamiliar body.

“... We think-... It could be possible to construct a sort of replacement. Because you still have the knee...”

Words simply existed in the air between them. Sora understood without taking them in, nodding vacantly.

“... I'm so sorry.”

Turning his head at last, Sora looked at him with something more desperate in his eyes than he'd ever want to show. “... I would have let the wound get worse, if you hadn't been there with me...”

Riku's throat threatened to close, for a terrifying instant. “You would have died, if it had...”

“Then it's you that saved me.”

It was such a genuine and well-meaning statement that Riku was shaken, and he held him a bit tighter reflexively. Sora didn't know – or, he hadn't thought...

Trembling, Riku rested his head against Sora's. “It's my fault you were hurt in the first place. Everything you've been through – Ansem-...”

“It isn't your fault I was up there,” Sora insisted, too weak to comfort him physically.

“Why did you do it?” Riku needed to know badly enough to simply plow on through the question, even when his voice broke. “You tried to save Ansem. Why?”

Sora pulled away slightly. “I couldn't just let him die, not when I could try to stop it...”

“He tried to kill you!”
Riku regretted it instantly. Sora shrank, explaining himself feebly, “I didn't have time to think about all of that, I just... did the first thing that came to mind.”

“... I know you did,” he exhaled shakily, almost inaudible. “You're too good... Like I said.”

Sora thought he should have been flattered, but wasn't able to be. He lowered his voice. “It didn't matter anyway, did it? Ansem didn't make it, right...?”

“No. I left him.”

Almost flinching, Sora waited for him to follow that up with some manner of justification, a reason why he had no other choice. Riku couldn't bring himself to provide one.

“... I'm sorry, Riku...”

He shook his head stiffly. “It's better... Ansem... Ansem was a terrible man, who hurt everyone I loved... and hurt me. Even if I thought we could go back and save him, I wouldn't.”

Even to Sora, it sounded like there was more to it than that. He didn't know how to ask, though, even if he had thought it was a good idea to. He wrapped a hand around Riku's, and felt it quaver in his gentle grasp.

“... The only part of it I still regret is...” Riku squeezed a little. “I regret that you sacrificed for Ansem, only for me to kill him. I'm sorry... I don't know... If you can't forgive me for that, I understand.”

There was so much pain in Riku's voice. For all his attempts at hiding it, Sora heard it all, and wished he could ease it. “I didn't save him because he mattered to me... All the people I wanted to protect are safe, and even if getting hurt didn't do anything to help, I won't regret being able to keep living you with and Roxas and Kairi and Namie.”

Riku could say nothing. The only thing on his mind was a mantra, the recurring thought that he didn't deserve someone like Sora.

“You know...” Tentatively, Sora decided to voice what he'd been getting the sense of. “It's okay if you're sad about leaving him. It's okay if you're not, too.”

“... I don't know what I feel.”

Sora's forehead rested against Riku's. “When you do, you can tell me.”

“Loving you if the only thing that still makes any sense.”

He started to smile, but it hitched and faded. “... You shouldn't have to give up your life to take care of me.”

“I'm not. I wouldn't be giving up anything,” Riku told him, drawing himself up again. “Besides... I know you. You won't let this defeat you. You're too stubborn.”

An optimist at his core, Sora's heart fluttered with rekindled hope. “You're probably right.”

“No matter what, though, I won't leave you.” It was a statement, something final that left no room for argument. Sora leaned onto him again, wishing he had a way with words or the strength to say them all. He could have expressed a complete outpouring of emotion, an endless fount of adoration for him.
“You're so much better than you think,” he murmured, instead, and Riku said nothing. He was sure he could hear Ansem sneering the contrary in his ear... but he ignored it.

They were both quiet for another few minutes while Sora tentatively brushed fingers over his thigh, gentle against the pain radiating down through bones no longer there. It was bizarre and a little frightening to still be able to feel his leg, like it should be there and perfectly usable save for the agony.

“... Did anyone else get hurt?”

“Not badly,” Riku breathed. “Bruises, cuts. Axel's ribs were broken, but he didn't seem worried about it, and neither did the other pirates.”

“I'm glad...”

“I'll make sure everyone is seen by the healers in Radiant Garden, just in case, but you're my priority.”

“It's going to be nice,” Sora murmured, “... being back where you and Kairi grew up. Oh, and Namine too, I guess.”

Riku managed a faint smile. “Yes. You'll like Namine... I'm glad you'll get to know her.”

“I think Roxas really likes her...”

“... She had a friend here, then.” Riku was honestly glad for that, with all his heart, but had a troubling notion occur to him.

“It's good for both of them,” Sora agreed.

“... You don't think he loves her, do you?”

Sora paused. He'd never really thought of Roxas being in love, before. “I don't know... I can ask him soon,” he offered with a bit of a smile, when Riku was visibly bothered.

“I'm not sure how Kairi would feel about that.”

“Kairi?” Sora tilted his head a little, not following.

“She... I'll let her explain.” A tiny flush had risen to Riku's cheeks. “But she'd be... cautious, I think, about someone being in love with Namine...”

“I understand, I think. If I'd been apart from Roxas as long as she's been away from Namine, I'd want him all to myself for a while, too...”

His blush deepened, a Riku held Sora a little tighter. “Right...”

It was ridiculous to be jealous, but he still had to make an effort when it came to putting it aside. Sora looked up from his leg to Riku, his request almost inaudible.

“Is it okay to kiss you?”

He only thought about it for a second. “Yes.”

Their lips brushed, pressing slowly and breathing each other in. The kiss was merely reassurance that they had each other, and Sora didn't linger over it for very long. Tilting his head forward, he tried to
gauge whether or not Riku had relaxed at all, and was relieved to find that he had.

“How long until we reach Radiant Garden?”

“Hours. I'm not sure how many – this ship moves like none I've seen... And I haven't been on deck. At most, I would guess half a day... and I don't think it's even going to take that.”

Sora nodded. “I think I could sleep a little longer... See everyone when we get there...”

“That's a good idea. You need rest.”

Lowering his arms to the bed to ease himself back down, Sora looked up at him. “You'll be here when I wake up?”

“I'll be with you every time you wake, for as long as you want me to be.”

Daylight soaked the deck and strained Sora's eyes, when he hobbled up onto the deck. He leaned heavily on a sort of rickety crutch Zexion provided for him, spurred into movement by the announcement that Radiant Garden was within view. His other arm clung to Riku, who was dreading having to lay eyes on the Kingdom out of the illogical fear that it would still be on fire. His fears were proven to be unfounded when they took it in, the castle still defined against the horizon.

It was stunning, how... normal it looked. He and Kairi had both been picturing the entire landscape reduced to rubble, and she couldn't seem to stop herself from trembling as they approached her Kingdom. She stood at the bow with Namine, who stared with wide, glistening eyes.

Only Roxas seemed uninterested in the Kingdom, his eyes trained on the hatch. He leapt to his feet the moment Sora's bushy hair came up from under the deck. “Sora-...!”

His eyes caught on the movement, and Sora broke into a wide smile.

“Don't rush,” Riku warned, but couldn't help but grin anyway. Knowing they were going somewhere they could call home had lifted Sora's spirits and given him an energy he hadn't expected he'd see for days, if not weeks. Namine looked over her shoulder at the commotion, and Kairi turned quickly, her heart leaping.

Roxas came right up to him and braced his shoulders, a part of him hardly believing he was seeing him alive and alert again. “How's...?”

“What, this?” Sora teased weakly. “Can hardly feel it.”

A shocked, breathless laugh left Roxas's throat. “Nothing keeps you down long, does it?”

“Bet I could still race you,” he challenged affectionately. Riku watched him fondly, though privately, his worry was undiminished.

“I'll owe you one,” Roxas promised, pulling away.

Namine was coming towards them, mostly to let Kairi check on Sora. Her approach was accompanied by several once-overs, Kairi's anxiety having been mostly left to build between her visits to sick bay. Every time she'd gone, Sora had been pale and barely responsive, so she had good
reason to worry.

“Are you sure it's okay to be standing up here...?”

Sora tilted his chin to stare at the outline of the palace. “I wouldn't miss this.”

“It looks like they've been doing a good job of rebuilding,” Riku observed, for Kairi's sake.

“Radiant Garden is resilient...” Namie commented.

Kairi looked hopeful, staring hard at the shoreline as though her mother and father might be waiting for her there. “There would have to be plenty of survivors to build up so much...”

“The destruction must have been contained, or dealt with fast... The Never Was didn't stay very long,” Namie remembered aloud. Behind them, Axel had come up on deck, and made to join them at a leisurely pace.

Riku's mind had already started to work, shifting into a more military mindset. “We can help with the restoration and make sure the deaths are properly recognized.”

“You and I won't have much time to rest,” Kairi agreed. “We'll have to get straight to work.”

“We'll discuss a plan of action, once we know... who we can work with.” Riku felt it was indelicate to say 'once we know who survived'.

“Am I interrupting?”

Roxas felt a dead-stop in his chest, turning to the speaker, and Kairi was instantly wary. She was sure Axel couldn't be oblivious to what had to be done with him – the gallows would await a typical pirate, but due to their unusual circumstances, he had to expect imprisonment. She had her doubts he would come quietly, and the crackle of flames couldn't be blocked from memory.

Riku glanced around, mistrust piqued by virtue of not having heard him approach. “... Not at all.”

Apparently oblivious to the minor alarm he'd stirred, Axel looked past the little group. “There it is, then,” he hummed. Other members of the crew had come up on deck to join the celebrations, or clambered down from the crow's nest. “Must be exciting. It's a shame... I wouldn't mind seeing Radiant Garden from a visitor's perspective.”

His chakram was summoned to his free hand, the other clenched at his side, and Sora froze. His eyes fixed upon it, even as Riku swiftly stepped between to shield him.

“What are you doing?” Riku's eyes narrowed.

“Axel...” Roxas warned, motioning as though to summon his keyblade. Xigbar took aim with his pistols, and they almost all went still. Only Namie moved to latch to Kairi's arm, eyes round. Subtly, she began to urge Namie behind her and cast her eyes around for an escape.

“As far as I see it, I'm doing you a favor,” Axel claimed, smirking. “You can't be a pirate Captain and a Navy dog.”

“No hard feelings, Cap', but I'm not ending up in a cell,” Xigbar's crooked grin grew wide.

“None of us are accompanying you to Radiant Garden,” Axel announced. “Something tells me you never intended to let us leave without a Captain – that would be irresponsible.”
Surprisingly hotly, Namine started, “If you're throwing Riku over -”

“I'm not _throwing_ anyone. This is the most civil mutiny I've ever been a part of,” he snorted. “I'm at least giving you the chance to go quietly. You can take a boat.”

Roxas stared, and a small part of him bubbled with unwilling amusement.

“... That's it?” Sora broke the staggered silence.

“That's it. Unless you _want_ to fight.”

Riku regarded him with no less hostility. “And I suppose after this, you'll wrangle your way to Captainship?”

“Would you prefer _Xigbar_?” Axel jerked his head in said man's direction, who sneered. For any bluster, though, Xigbar wasn't willing to fight for a position of leadership; he was much too comfortable in his role, which allowed plenty of time to monopolize Demyx or challenge authority.

Debating, Kairi glanced at Riku. “Can we really allow them to get away?”

Axel cut across before he had a chance to reply, irked by the implication that they had any choice in the matter. “Princess, you're once again displaying a stunning lack of understanding. The kidnapping, I understand, but you've got to get a _mutiny_.”

Her eyes narrowed. Riku gave him a harsh look, regardless giving her an answer neither one liked. “... Our Navy's in no shape to follow.”

“We have to get Sora and Namine out,” she determined, resigned. Sora's protest was immediate.

“I'm not leaving without all of you!”

“Take your time. You all can go,” Axel claimed, and did not look at Roxas. There was an audible click of cocking pistols.

With one more suspicious look at Axel, Kairi gave in. She ushered Namine towards the lifeboat first, and though she gave Roxas a long look of worry, Namine did not object. She climbed into the boat, and the rest of the group was urged towards it by the spiked end of a chakram.

Axel only lowered it to reach out with his other hand, and dropped the familiar pendant from his fingers. The chain was twined around them, letting it dangle.

“Roxas.”

Pausing, Roxas stared at it, a small smirk starting to tug at his lips and the burned handprint under his shirt twinging. Sora gripped the edge of the boat, like he intended to leap back out towards Roxas.

Reaching out, Roxas clasped the pendant and was pulled towards Axel without warning. The smirk dropped as he was kissed, firm and hot, while Axel withdrew his fingers from the chain and let Roxas take it.

Riku rose up, ready to intervene, and Sora stammered in shock. “What do you think you're doing?!”

Already, Axel was drawing away, and muttered, “Saying goodbye.”

“Son of a bitch...” Roxas spoke too low for anyone but Axel to hear, but the edge to his words was unable to take the fondness out of them.
Strange. He'd expected that if it was really goodbye, Axel would have kissed him for longer.

“Go,” he smirked. “Don't forget me.”

“You've made an impression.” Roxas closed the chain around his neck and pulled away, not breaking eye contact until he was turning to climb into the boat. Namine's hands, nervously clasped, finally broke apart to rest on Roxas's arm. He gave her the smallest shake of his head, denying that anything was wrong.

Sora was still gaping. Riku wasn't sure whether or not his outraged was founded, but he glared at Axel nonetheless as he glanced between the two of them, looking for some indication that he might have to stay and fight for Roxas's honor instead. None came.

“Get that rope?” Roxas pointed, instead.

Riku nodded briskly, trying to put what had just occurred out of his mind, and started arranging the ropes to lower the boat with Roxas's aid. They were heavier, all together, than Riku thought they could manage... but they were the only able-bodied pair left, and that would have to do.

It took much strain to lower the boat, and they managed to keep it fairly level. Sora shut his eyes at every tiny jolt, and it was Kairi's unofficial duty to steady him without tipping the boat. Although Namine was frail, she did her best to help nonetheless, and Riku had to admit that every bit of strength she had probably helped, in the end.

Roxas braced on the side as the boat hit the water, hastily releasing the ropes.

“We should go quickly,” Riku took up the oars. “Before they change the water or the wind...”

“They won't,” Namine said, completely assured.

“Right.” Roxas chanced a quick look up.

Axel was watching, leaning against the side of the Never Was almost casually. His chakram had been banished, and the order already issued to turn the ship around once the lifeboat was clear of them.

Roxas indulged in a grin, and saw Axel return it. He'd really just... let him go, with his pendant and his freedom. He was almost certain it was the most valuable thing Axel had in the treasure chest, of his, and had known it from the first time he'd taken it out with an appraising eye.

But, if he'd been telling the truth - and Roxas was inclined to believe he was - it hadn't been as valuable to Axel as he was.

And still. He'd let him go.

Riku rowed them away, towards Radiant Garden, and eventually Roxas had to stop watching. Axel pulled himself away from the side, the vacancy in his chest distressingly pronounced, but the palm of his hand tingling. He still thought he could feel the remnants of the burn he'd printed over his heart, but Axel knew it was only in his head.

The Ship That Never Was began to alter course, and in no time at all, it was farther away than Radiant Garden was. They could hear the distant bustle of life from the harbor, a more welcome sound than any Namine thought she'd ever heard. Kairi's arms wrapped around her shoulders, taking in her rosy cheeks and streaming eyes.
“We're free,” Namine breathed. Kairi rested her cheek against her hair.

“We're home.”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone going, "Oh god there's one chapter left what's going to go wrong?", no worries! Chapter 28 is the epilogue.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

The months were kind to Radiant Garden. A kingdom in mourning – for its people, for its King – had found reason to rejoice again when the Crown Princess returned not only with a bevy of heroes, but the princess the people had thought was lost for good. Their stories brought a second wind back into the rebuilding efforts, and smiles back to many faces. Every death was recognized with a full day set aside to show respect.

The healing began.

It took time before Sora was able to walk on his own, but force of will and proper care prevailed. Though he wasn't always perfectly steady, the sturdy wood attachment was a good replacement for his lost leg, and he no longer even required the use of a cane. His lordship, the acting Admiral, was free with both his relief and his pride, and when Sora proved himself time and time again, Riku put his name forth for rank consideration. His injury in service of the Royal Navy had opened eligibility for him to join the service, bypassing the years of formal training - an opportunity he'd accepted without hesitation.

Frequently, Sora wound up away from their new home, but Roxas was glad to miss him. Time together had rekindled his humanity and given him back the ability to feel – a worthy trade, for mortality. Mercifully, the link between them didn't sever while Sora was away, and they guaranteed themselves the most of their time together when he was once more ashore.

In the meantime, Roxas had much to occupy himself with. He had promptly been appointed as the personal guard to Her Highness, Princess Namine, for she trusted him unlike anyone else. Often taken by bouts of exhaustion and illness, Namine needed Roxas's help just to get around the castle. She got stronger over time and needed his arm less and less, but there were still periods of fatigue so intense she could hardly make it to her room on her own shaking legs.

Regardless, Kairi almost always had Namine's other arm in hers, or her hand in her grasp. She wouldn't let her out of her sight, if she could help it, and that seemed to suit them both. No one questioned, much less argued, even when they were frequently woken in the same bed.

There wasn't such a thing as a calm day. There was too much to do – missives to be sent, trade to negotiate and renegotiate, bargains to be struck. Delegates arrived and officers relocated from colonies to Radiant Garden, and – to Riku's immense relief – a new Admiral was appointed after some time. He had been quite willing to take up his post as Captain, once more... but that only lasted long enough for his promotion ceremony to be arranged.

Sora beamed, all throughout. Among the row of identically-dressed officers, he stood at attention, salute proper after so much practice, and watched Riku stand before them all in full regalia. Her Majesty, the Queen Regent, made mention of his deeds against the fearsome Ship That Never Was in her address, and recited the promotional script with a tenderness she'd picked up from her daughters. Beside her at the head of the hall were both princesses, and as was tradition for the time of mourning, a bare space had been left in the line where His Majesty, Kairi’s father, would have stood. Kairi pinned Riku’s new stripe, herself, and led the applause from the nobles and uniformed men in attendance. He was presented with a grander sword (and a subdued promise that the blade would not break) and a certificate to verify his new rank as Commodore.
Every excuse to celebrate was taken, though, and what Riku would have rather hoped to be a short ceremony became quite the soiree. He shook hands one after the other as he was congratulated by every person in attendance, and did his utmost to look interested in what they had to say.

Really, he just wanted to find his way back to Sora.

Exchanging her own pleasantries, Kairi gracefully drifted between officials, guests, and members of the court. The gathering was actually quite sparse compared to what they had all been used to before the destruction, but it was the grandest they'd had since their return. She sipped from a delicate crystal cup without ever having to remove her arm from Namine’s, the two of them cutting a wide swath through the crowd with their voluminous skirts.

Back straight and eyes forward, Roxas strode at a measured distance behind them. He'd mindfully eaten before the ceremony to prepare for resisting the refreshments, but all the same, he was a little envious of some of the dessert arrangements. Whenever he caught a glimpse of Namine's face, though, it was somewhat overshadowed by concern.

The grandeur could be overstimulating, and he recognized the faintly vacant expression by now. He hoped they'd be moving on from the public party, soon.

Equally (if not more) conscientious, Kairi steered them towards the newly-appointed Commodore and the Lord he was engaged with.

“Would I be able to cut in?” she inquired, a sweet smile on her face and a shadow of the like on Namine's. Both Riku and the Lord bowed cordially.

“Your Highnesses. Of course.”

The Lord departed, and Kairi brought Namine around to efficiently bar the path to Riku. “Allow me to give my unofficial congratulations on your promotion, Commodore,” she beamed. She'd already noticed his eyes sliding past her, but wasn't offended when she knew perfectly well who he was searching for.

Sora was being practically strong-armed into a chair by his fellow officers, and eased into the seat with a bright, sheepish grin.

“It's an honor, Your Highness. I hope to be worthy of it,” he replied, all formality despite the affectionate pull of his heartstrings.

“You've already proven yourself to be,” Namine reminded him.

Riku's gaze followed Sora a moment longer before his focus returned. “I must admit, it should be an easier run than interim Admiral.”

“But not an excuse to take things easy,” Kairi teased, and there was laughter in Namine's eyes.

“I don't think the Commodore knows how to relax, much less slack.”

“Untrue,” Riku frowned.

Kairi softened her voice so as not to be overheard, raising a hand to her lips as though sharing a secret. “Oh, really? Must be that new officer's influence,” she smirked. Namine nodded sagely.

“Undoubtedly...”
“I wouldn’t know who or what you’re talking about.” A reflexive flush on Riku’s face told otherwise. Kairi giggled behind her hand.

“We did plan on extending an invitation to him, and to you,” Namine told him, eyes still atwinkle.

“Invitation?”

“I’ve arranged a private lunch, just for the four of us. And of course, Lady Namine will be escorted by her guard,” Kairi added. At the mention, Namine glanced over her shoulder to smile at Roxas.

Riku grinned, grateful for the chance to enjoy a more informal gathering with friends before the inevitable wetting-down he’d be attending later. “I’d be honored to accept, Your Highness.”

“Splendid. We will be taking it in my sitting room,” Kairi informed him airily. “If you’re care to deliver our invitation to Sora personally…”

“Happy to,” Riku gave her a fond look and bowed. “If you'll excuse me, then, Princesses…”

“Very good.” Kairi bowed her head politely and gently directed Namine the other way. Gliding along in step, Namine happily leaned into her support.

If Riku had observed any change in the two of them from childhood, it was that they seemed to require even less communication to be on the same wavelength, and the pair had grown sly. Riku was thankful to reap the benefits, and under Royal instruction, he strode towards Sora’s table with complete liberty to dismiss himself from anyone trying to stop him in his tracks.

Every officer rose to attention at his approach, Sora included, just one step behind. He was only a little slower to stand and salute, the smile on his face wide and welcoming.

“As you were,” Riku nodded to them, and addressed Sora. “If I may have a word?”

“Yes, sir.” Sora eased off the posture and fell into step with him as best he could, given his uneven gait. The two of them kept a professional space between them, while in the public eye.

Riku lowered his voice and leaned in just a little, to be heard. “The Princesses have invited us to a private lunch in the parlor.”

“Right now?” If it were possible, Sora perked up even more.

“They'll meet us there,” Riku nodded.

“Then lead the way,” Sora declared, extending a hand before them. It took much willpower on both of their parts not to take hold of each other, as they walked.

“Think you'll make Captain, next?”

“I think I deserve it,” Sora said confidently, “... but I'm not sure I'd make any more than an honorary rank with this.” He kicked forward a little with his false leg.

“If anyone can do it, it's you. You've barely slowed down.”


“As long as we never spar in front of your crew, then. I'd hate for them to see you defeated.”
Sora scoffed playfully. “You'll just see what happens if you ever go easy on me.”

They'd left behind the crowd, giving them more freedom to tease each other. Riku snickered. “That would never happen.”

“You just need a handicap to match.”

“I'm willing to fight blindfolded.”

Smile vanishing, Sora's surprise was blatant. “Still...?”

“It's been long enough,” Riku admitted, “I may need to get back up to snuff. Unpleasant as it may be... it's still a valuable skill.”

Slowly, Sora nodded. “It is amazing to watch.”

“Ansem seemed to think so,” he muttered.

Mentions of his imposter father came infrequently. They were all careful not to allude to him, much less say his name, but Riku still seemed to feel his presence like a ghost. Even though they'd all shared suspicions as to why that was, he hadn't talked about it. On the day of his promotion, Sora guessed it made sense that Ansem would be lurking somewhere around the back of his mind... but he really wished that he wasn't. Silent, Sora maintained careful professionalism, but ached to touch him or offer some sort of comforting gesture.

If nothing else, Riku shook it off faster than he used to. “Down this way,” he indicated, and took them away from prying eyes.

They seized the opportunity to join hands immediately. Riku knocked on the parlor door, and Sora's smile grew wide enough to count his teeth. The moment had passed and he was giddy again, too much to even contain.

“Come in,” Kairi called. They were already seated, Namine at her right and the chairs arranged in a circle around their lavishly spread table. Roxas was on Namine's other side, posture allowed to slacken after standing all day, but he got up again when Sora appeared at the open door.

Riku bowed, customs ingrained, and Sora broke away to make right towards his brother.

“Oh, honestly, there's no need for that now,” Namine, who had gotten much better about speaking her mind, told Riku.

“Come and sit,” Kairi gestured to the seat beside her. To the side of them, Roxas wrapped a hand around the back of Sora's neck, bringing their foreheads together.

In the time they'd been in the palace since Sora's latest return, they hadn't actually yet had a moment together. For a second, Roxas closed his eyes, pleased to feel their heartbeats in sync – it seemed strange that he'd never noticed the way they did that, before the Never Was.

“They finally found a uniform to fit you,” he observed snidely.

“Speak for yourself,” Sora laughed. “Does that thing stand up by itself when you take it off?”

Eyes on the pair, Riku sank into the seat next to Kairi and let himself lean forward. The sight of them was endearing, and time had allowed him to get used to Roxas, though his impression was still somewhat tentative. The only sure feeling he had about Roxas was appreciation, knowing he cared
about Sora more than anyone, and that was enough.

“I didn't think I'd ever be allowed to stop smiling...” Riku commented, and massaged his jaw.

“Heaven forbid,” Namine glanced at Kairi, who giggled.

“We'll have to promote you more often.”

“It suits you,” Roxas grinned, hand sliding from Sora's neck and allowing them to part.

“It aches, after a while...” Nonetheless, Riku lifted his gaze and grinned back.

“Are we really going to be left to ourselves?” Sora asked hopefully, taking the seat between Riku and Roxas.

“With Roxas acting as our supervision, there should be no need for interruptions,” Kairi replied. With an exaggerated sigh of relief, Sora slid his fingers between Riku's.

“That's a relief.” Riku laced their fingers properly and raised his hand to kiss it. “We could all use a proper celebration with less...”

“Pomp?” Namine suggested. Her fingers traced idly against her arranged skirts, progressively brighter in comfortable company. Roxas grinned at her.

“Agreed.”

“Hear, hear!” Sora declared, lifting an imaginary drink.

Kairi nodded at the gesture. “That's a very good idea. There's a decanter on the table there...”

“I've got it,” Roxas offered. He had yet to sit down again... primarily out of habit. He balanced the crystal in his hand and poured for each of them, being thanked in turn. With a dainty sip from her filled glass, Kairi gestured towards the refreshment spread.

“Everything else, as you can see, is already laid out for us.”

“Ah – yes...” Riku tore his gaze away from Sora, lips still brushing his hand. Quickly, Sora took his eyes off Riku as well and began to spoon the light meal onto his plate.

It was a rather revolting display of affection, in Roxas's opinion, but he'd long ago decided not to fault Riku for them. He merely averted his eyes.

Compulsively, Kairi started to fill Namine's plate before her own, which Namine allowed since she knew it was a matter of comfort for her. “So, Riku... rumor has it that your crew will be ready to depart by tomorrow afternoon.”

“If all goes according to plan. We're anticipating clear skies.” Riku was waiting for them to serve themselves before he started, and Roxas was giving them the same courtesy. Sora turned pink when he realized what they were doing, but no one appeared to notice but Namine, who gave him a slight smile in wordless encouragement. Manners really weren't of such importance, here.

“Excellent,” Kairi nodded. “On your next return, you must stay long enough for us to hold the official announcement.”

“I'll send word ahead, if I can,” Riku affirmed.
“If you're announcing the engagement soon, how long will it be before the wedding?” Sora inquired curiously.

“Oh,” Kairi waved a hand airily, “however long we need. Royal engagements go on for years. Fifty years ago, we'd have betrothed from birth.”

Sora turned to his brother with a bewildered shake of his head. Roxas just shrugged back at him and grinned.

“It's too high class for us to understand,” he dismissed.

Namine giggled softly. “It will be years before Kairi even needs to marry. Mother is still serving as the Queen regent, while Kairi finishes her lessons.”

“You're not wrong, though... Engagements can be ridiculous. Ours will wind up becoming a banquet to rival the actual wedding.” Riku started to serve himself, and went on with his voice lowered. “Which seems like a waste, to me, but... ceremony.”

Blinking, and still a little hung up on what Namine said - he tended to forget she and Kairi called the same person 'Mother' - Sora shook his head. “Seems strange that you can't just order there to be a small party.”

“It's important to hold events of some grandeur as we recover from tragedy,” Kairi explained. Idle, gentle fingers ran over the back of Namine's free hand. “A celebration lifts the spirit of the people, and lets them see that things will return to normal.”

“We can also distribute food to the people... There's often excess,” Namine suggested. She turned her hand to press their palms together, and Kairi locked their fingers.

“Yes, exactly,” she agreed. “We couldn't let all of that go to waste.”

Riku appeared appeased. “That sounds much better than letting to nobles gorge themselves. If they think there'll be some left over, someone inevitably makes themselves sick...”

Roxas almost shuddered. Kairi grimaced.

“Yes, that is an unfortunate truth.”

“So we'll disallow that. Controlled portions, perhaps.” Riku nudged Sora lightly and smirked at his heaped plate. “But we'll still be sure to double yours.”

Sora gave him a knowing look. “Not special treatment, of course, right?”

“You are an officer under my command,” Riku denied in mock-offense. “I would never show favoritism.”

“Apologies, Sir.” Leaning in, Sora stole a kiss... to his cheek. Grinning, Riku refrained from kissing him the way he wanted to, out of respect to Roxas. When he found him conveniently looking the other way, though, he captured his lips anyway.

Kairi shared a quick look with Namine, heart tending to melt whenever they acted as in love as they were. Though she didn't fawn quite so much, Namine's amusement was visible, even as she tried to hide it by nibbling at her tiny triangle sandwich.

“All of the details will be planned when we see each other again,” Kairi let the topic conclude.
Slowly, attempting to sound casual, Roxas asked, “Do you know how long you'll be gone this time?”

Riku had parted from Sora, though he wished he could have lingered. “Not more than a month... Not without checking in.”

“That's good,” Roxas looked to Sora, relieved. “It won't be long.”

Sora had been reminded of something, and turned away from Riku to excitedly take his twin's hand. “Roxas, soon we'll be traveling to Destiny Islands.”

“... Really?” A little stab of jealousy wriggled through Roxas's gut. As much as he would've liked to be happy that Sora would get to visit their birthplace, he hated – just a little – that it would be with Riku, instead of him.

“If there's anything we can bring you,” Riku began to offer, but Sora interrupted.

“Well, actually, I was thinking of asking the Princesses to accompany us for a... tour? Is that the right word?”

Kairi perked up. “I've never been to the Island colonies.”

“They sound lovely... and I wouldn't mind experiencing proper travel by sea,” Namine pondered. Riku had taken on a look of consideration, and Roxas, a conspiratorial grin.

“Of course, they would need an escort to accompany them,” he mused.

Sora wore the same expression, making the two of them more identical than usual. “And a guard who knows the territory would be even better.”

“I believe we're being used,” Kairi remarked teasingly to Namine.

Suddenly alarmed, Sora protested. “That's not what I meant! I want all of you to see it. All of us. Together.”

Smiling warmly, Namine glanced at Roxas. “We would be very grateful if you would agree to accompany us.”

“I would, of course.” Now that the teasing had passed, Roxas was a little stunned by the prospect. For the first time in years, they could see... home. Radiant Garden was undeniably that, now, but there was still something inexplicably comforting about returning to the place they came from.

“We'll see home together,” Sora announced, patting him encouragingly on the back. The words he chose were more comforting than he could have known; Roxas was glad to know that he felt the same way.

Namine practically beamed at him, and turned the smile on Kairi as she caressed the back of her hand. Kairi met it with one of her own, a little dazzled and momentarily forgetting to listen when Riku talked.

“Their Royal Highnesses would need to propose this tour, but I can arrange the details with the Admiral on your behalf.”

“We would love that,” Namine declared. Kairi tuned in again and faced Riku.

“We'll discuss it with Her Majesty this evening.”
“Sounds good.” Riku hesitated. “Is it strange that I find her more intimidating to talk to, now?”

“You do?” Kairi blinked.

“I feel like she's watching me, assessing how capable I'll be as a king... It's a little nerve-wracking.”

“Is that what you think?” she laughed. “I'm almost certain when she looks at you, she's envisioning grandchildren.”

“That's nearly as nerve-wracking...!”

Namine did her best to look sympathetic, but she was the only one. Kairi covered a louder laugh, but Sora didn't manage so well. He had to bring a hand up to his mouth, snorting and snickering, until he became starry-eyed as he imagined a child with Riku and Kairi's combined features. The two people he loved most in the world - aside from his own brother - mixed into one person. A much smaller person he could carry around on his shoulders and be called an uncle to. He could safely determine that they'd have the most beautiful baby Prince or Princess.

Riku's attempt to picture their children was less successful, his imagination getting in his own way. Grimly, he wondered how he could possibly be a father with only Ansem's example to learn from... A vow to be nothing like him didn't seem like enough.

Kairi cleared her throat. “Well, we definitely don't need to think about that for some time.”

“Agreed,” Riku echoed, flustered. Kairi took a careful drink to regain her composure.

“That aside, Riku, is there anything else your vessel needs to depart on time?”

He seemed glad to be talking business, again. “It's all arranged. The crew has been given leave for the evening to have time with their families... Supplies have been organized...”

Kairi nodded in understanding. “The Royal Family will of course be present to see you off...” she shot an anxious glance at Namine. “If you think you'll have the strength for it...”

“I'll be fine,” she reassured her. “Perhaps I should lie down shortly, though... I'm feeling a little fatigued.”

“Of course,” Kairi agreed immediately. “Whatever you need. Should I send for someone...?”

Riku shot her a faintly teasing smirk – private retaliation, since she'd made good-natured jibes at him before over his overactive concern for Sora.

“I don't think she needs to be carried there, Your Highness,” Roxas contained polite amusement, but also looked to Namine. “Though, if I'm wrong, I should be up to the task.”

“I would appreciate an escort, if it isn't terrible of me to take you from Sora so early. You can return right after!”

“Not at all.” Wrapping his fingers around Sora's forearm, Roxas nodded to him and was briefly gripped back. “We'll have time to see each other before you leave.”

“You can bet on it.”

“If it isn't enough time, I could always delay our departure,” Riku offered. “Triple-check our inventory... And inspect every nook for stowaways.”
At the significant look on his face, Kairi managed to look sheepish through a grin. “My days of sneaking onto ships are done, you know that.”

Smiling, Naming got to her feet carefully and kissed Kairi’s cheek, receiving one on her hand in return. Roxas let go of Sora to offer her an arm, instead. They bade her a good rest and waved aside her apologies, and Roxas gave a short bow as to not disturb her hold.


“We’ll see you shortly,” Riku inclined his head wryly.

The two of them departed, and Roxas did not call attention to the fact that she wasn’t learning on him very hard. She played the part as they departed down the corridor, and looked a tiny bit shamefaced when he gave her an odd look.

“... I really could do with a departure from the excitement, but truthfully, I needed a private word.”

Roxas's expression became serious. “What's happened?”

“I've been drawing, again. There's one I'd like you to see.”

His eyes widened, and he stopped them with a long look around to be sure they were alone. Even though he'd suspected Namine had not lost her powers, he hadn't been given such direct confirmation until that moment. “Alright, show it to me.”

She ushered him even further aside, removing the folded slip of paper from where she'd had it hidden in her bodice, pink-cheeked. To conceal it, Roxas put his shoulder to the wall, and unfolded it carefully.

Speech failed him.

“... I think you know where that is,” Namine regarded him, searching for some indication of what he was feeling. “It's up to you, whether or not you go.”

He swallowed. “... Can this really happen?”

She nodded once, and his thoughts raced.

“Thank you for giving me this,” he said, hushed. Namine squeezed his arm.

“I can make it to my room on my own, if you'd like some time in private to decide what you'll do.”

“I'll see you to your room,” Roxas shook his head. “Will you be alright on your own, after that?”

“I'll be just fine.”

She did not break into his thoughts as they walked up the long way to the Royal Wing, and he saw her safely to her chambers without really seeing at all. Namine's drawing lingered in his mind's eye, and he could not stop thinking in circles around the image. As had become their custom, he took her hand and squeezed lightly before they parted, too winded to say anything more. Then he retreated to solitude, and gave himself time to think.
Fingers slid anxiously along the surface of his pint. Roxas stared down into the ale rather than give into the urge to peer around the tavern patrons, or send furtive looks at the door from his table in a dim corner. For all the pros and cons he'd weighed, the decision to be here was still something he was wrestling with. Although he'd never known her to be wrong, he still needed to convince himself Namine was right about the tavern, and the drawing... and, if she was, that he wasn't doing something incredibly foolish.

Slow, even breaths. To calm his nerves, Roxas tossed back a draft of ale to steady himself, vision obscured by the clunky tin.

The clink and clatter against the tabletop was thunderous.

Startled, Roxas let the tankard thud against the table, and his eyes raked over gold. An immense pile of glittering coins, that had come from an upturned purse dangling from slender fingers. His gaze slowly panned up the cloaked figure before him.

Axel's lips curled upwards, brilliant green eyes aglow.

"Is this still what it takes to get a look at your face?"

Every detail of Axel filled in and sharpened the memory of him, bringing a smirk to Roxas's face that he couldn't fight. "I hope you realize there's nothing you can pay me for."

"That's not payment. It's a gift." Intent and drinking in the sight of him, Axel slid into the seat across. "Souvenirs, from my travels."

"I'm sure you earned every piece." Roxas slid his hand across the small pile, gathering a few to stroke between his fingers.

"I would say so."

He captured the coins in his palm with a small flourish. "Find anything else worthwhile?"

Axel's gaze, still intense, had taken on a glint of greed out of the longing to touch him. "Not until just now."

Roxas laughed quietly, but a surge of emotion cut him off short. It was unlike anything he'd ever felt before with Axel – a swell, something that could have overcome him completely if he hadn't been so surprised. He passed it off, commenting, "Aren't you charming tonight?"

"Couldn't let you think you haven't been missed," he responded smartly, but if Axel had needed to think about it, he would have concluded it was true. The emptiness in his chest was more prominent with Roxas here, just across the table after so long... but it was strangely cathartic, like something that had been doing him harm had been removed. A jerking knife had been taken out of his chest, and Axel was feeling the hole it'd left behind.

"Have you docked somewhere safe?" Roxas's fingers continued to play over the gold. "Ship hidden?"

"Far off. I'd tell you where... but, for obvious reasons..."

He nodded. "I'd be obligated as a member of the Queen's Guard. Of course."

"Queen's Guard?" Axel whistled low.
“Officially, but Namine is all I'm truly guarding.”

“Sounds like you have a good life, here.” Vaguely, he was... disappointed. Strange – ridiculous, more like, for he hadn't come ashore with delusions. Axel had known that whatever life Roxas had was leaps and bounds better than what he'd find on a pirate ship.

“... And you?” Roxas questioned cautiously. “What became of... all of it?”

“I've kept my authority,” Axel answered with a faint smirk. “I've been part of enough mutinies to prevent one when I see it stirring. The crew is in line... The gold is still easy to come by...” The smirk faded. “But we haven't found anything else.”

No sign of his heart. Roxas nodded gravely, then looked up with a wry smile. “Should I give you a reminder of what you're looking for?”

“That would be deeply appreciated,” he purred. Roxas brought himself closer to the table, lowering his voice.

“I have a room upstairs for the night.”

Arching an eyebrow, Axel reached over and ran one finger down his chest. He stopped over the burn he'd left so long ago, barely touching, but Roxas inhaled sharply all the same. The handprint had not healed cleanly, the way it would have when he was separated from Sora and barely human – the scar was sensitive, and his heartbeat quickened underneath it.

“You were prepared to see me?”

“You're surprised that I knew to expect you?”

“Pleased.” Axel sat up, and leaned over the table. When he was kissed, Roxas tilted his head to meet it and grasped his hand to bring it up to his cheek. The heat against bare skin was what he wanted, and it was more than he remembered, firelight in flesh.

Running his thumb along his jaw, Axel deepened the kiss slowly and drew away too soon. “Let's see that room.”

The gold was collected in haste, and Roxas refused to betray his breathlessness. When every last piece was stowed, he took Axel by the hand, and led him up the tavern stairs. They were twined around one another the moment they were through the door, the exact image from Namine's drawing, and didn't part until the heat was too much to bear.

Roxas did not dare to look away lest he miss a single thing about the way Axel moved, even once his thoughts ran heavy with lethargy and afterglow. Although he still felt like there were coals smoldering away inside of him and he ached, he didn't think he'd ever felt so satisfied.

He lay back with the blankets pooled around his hips, in no rush to dress himself when he was otherwise preoccupied. The only thing that had not been stripped during their fervent affair was the pendant, and it rested by the imprint of raised, discolored skin. Axel's handprint, prominent and perfect. Green eyes returned to it regularly as he absentmindedly toyed with the chain, and when Roxas's eyes raised to follow the path of Axel's, they wound up staring at each other.

The words that had been so clear in his mind all night were suddenly on the very brink of being spoken... but Roxas wasn't sure that he should.

“... Is it different, with a heart?”
Swallowing hard, Roxas decided to answer honestly. “It's worlds apart.”

Axel let himself ruminate on that answer briefly, then shifted to lie down with him properly, kissing him. “With any luck, I'll know firsthand.”

Already-numb lips tingled with the warmth, and Roxas returned the kiss for as long as he could. He hesitated, and when he spoke, it was against better judgment. “I can't wait for you to feel what this is like…”

For a moment, it seemed Axel wouldn’t say anything. His fingers skimmed idly down his arm, drawing a contented purr from Roxas's throat.

“... I'd better get a move on quickly, then.”

“Stealing away into the night?” Roxas hummed. “How appropriate.”

“It fits the image of a dashing rogue... But I do hate to take off right after sex. Unless you'd care to join me?”

It was clear he was only half-serious, and had he not been, Roxas might have found it in him to tense. He sat up and kissed Axel again.

“Not this time.” Roxas matched the tone, but there was something like a promise deeper in it.

“What about a token to take with me, then?” Axel suggested, smirking. “I'd accept a jar of light, to make the journey back easier.”

His eyebrows lifted. “I thought you would have figured out by now... I can't do that anymore.”

The healing, the strength, the flashes of light he could produce with a thought… all of it had faded soon after reuniting with Sora, exchanged for a beating heart. Even his eyes, as they’d stared into Axel’s above him only moments ago, had glimmered with nothing more than the reflected lamplight, ordinary and human.

“So not a trace of you is of my world, anymore,” Axel surmised with a murmur, a bit let down.

Roxas’s eyes lowered.

“That's what I had to give in return for my heart...” His fingers ran down Axel's arm. “But it means the keyblade is safely out of my reach.”

“And you, safely out of reach of anyone like us, if any others exist...” Without warning, Axel swept over top of him and Roxas went still. “Except for mine, of course.”

Despite everything, he could feel the danger in Axel's presence. He was actually kind of glad to find he hadn't abandoned sense entirely. “... Except for you.”

“... Some other token, then,” Axel leaned in close enough to kiss him. “One of these will do…”

“Actually...” Roxas murmured against his lips. “I can think of one thing to give you... You can't hold it, but you can take it with you all the same.”

Axel made a low sound, indistinct but inquisitive, and Roxas abruptly slung an arm around his neck. He brought Axel down closer, kissing around his ear and nibbling at the lobe while he gathered the nerve to confess.

“... I love you.”
The emptiness in Axel throbbed. He was at a loss, becoming troubled by the wish to say it back.

“You don't have to lie and say the same,” Roxas's arm slid away. “I know.”

“I want to love you,” Axel sat up slowly. “Can that be enough?”

“It's plenty,” he confirmed, and knowing all that he did about Axel, it was true. “Let it remind you of what you're searching for, and why.”

“I will. And I'll come back to tell you when I find it,” Axel vowed, and got up to begin dressing himself. “Unless I'm sailing these waters before that happens... Then I'll come back anyway. See if I can convince you to run away with me.”

Roxas sat properly upright. “You're welcome to try, as often as you can.”

His heart ached with the small, indecisive disappointment that he wasn't going with Axel. But he couldn't... and he wouldn't.

Axel would come back; he'd make do.

“Will you know when I'm coming?”

Sliding across the bed, Roxas located his pants and started sliding them back on. “As long as I have Namine, I'll know.”

“So she hasn't lost her...” Axel trailed off with a vague motion, partway through lacing his boots. He'd found his trousers and fixed them, already.

“No... She explained it to me, in a way,” Roxas shrugged. “... I'm different. With Sora's heart and mine near to each other, I can be entirely human.”

There was still something displeasing about that notion, that complete severance from Axel's world, but he supposed it was just petty to complain. “My good fortune, then. Give her my regards, will you?”

“I can. I can't guarantee she'll appreciate it.”

“I wouldn't blame her if she didn't,” Axel admitted, pinning his cloak in place. Half-dressed, Roxas approached and wrapped a hand slowly around his arm.

“I'll see you down to the shore, if you'd like,” he offered. He wasn't ready to see him go, just yet.

“... I'd like that... But I can't take you near the ship. I don't want the entire Navy bearing down on us.” Axel tilted his chin up. “Halfway?”

“Halfway,” Roxas murmured. Axel traced the chain around his neck again, and watched him finish getting dressed.

He was aching to stay, but he didn't try to find an excuse to do it. They left the tavern with one covetous arm around Roxas's shoulder, and neither felt the chill of the sea air. Their walk was one of relative silence, the bustle of dock workers and common nightlife both comfortable and not.

Axel wanted to say something, but was half-certain that all his words would come out wrong and not true enough. Roxas's state was no better, not knowing what more he could say, but the words rang through their heads on repeat.
'I love you.'

It couldn't be the case... but Axel thought he remembered something like it, and when he realized they'd soon have to part, he found it in himself to ask his burning question.

“Love... Is it warm?”

Surprised enough by the question, Roxas couldn't answer for several moments. “... Sometimes. Other times it's so light all you can feel is it rising in you until you're almost floating. And others, it's so cold... freezing and clawing, and it hurts.”

Axel wasn't so sure he couldn't feel those things, but then the thought flitted away and he was nodding. They slowed to a stop.

“... This is where we part.”

Roxas turned to him, suddenly at a loss. 'Goodbye' didn't feel right, but he was going. There were bitter thoughts about being left alone, by Axel and by Sora, but neither were abandoning him.

“If this is when love hurts, I won't let it for long,” Axel promised, studying his face. Roxas's eyes softened.

“It won't start until you're gone... When I can't see you anymore.”

Lightly, Axel traced the burn. “I think I understand that.”

“Nn...” The touch didn't hurt, exactly. Whatever it did was so much stronger than that. Roxas tilted his head back, drawing himself up to align their mouths, but didn't yet kiss him. There was a second in which Axel was allowed to just breathe him in with the fleeting image of taking him, returning to the kingdom when they were triumphant...

But it wouldn't be the same, and it wasn't what he wanted. With no words, they kissed instead of saying goodbye. There was a small spike of heat that Axel reined in, but Roxas appreciated it all the same. He threw himself into it and let Axel wrap him up in his arms, and neither one pulled away. The kiss simply... ended, and they had no choice but to part.

Sighing softly, Axel began to step back. “I'll bring you more gifts. Won't be long.”

“I'll be waiting,” Roxas replied heavily. Mercifully, Axel managed to grin, and spoke to lighten the gloom.

“I'd tell you to keep a weather eye on the horizon, but you won't see us coming.”

He turned, cloak sweeping the ground, and Roxas was left with a faint smirk as he watched him for as long as he could. The night took its time hiding Axel from view – perhaps it couldn't, he thought, when Axel was practically fire itself. In time, though, Roxas found he couldn't make him out, and he started to feel the damp cold to the air at last. He turned to go back to the tavern, figuring he'd make use of the night he'd paid for and get a good, long sleep.

He'd be able to see Sora off, tomorrow, since the docks were only a stone's throw away. Namine wouldn't mind that he didn't return to the castle, having already discussed it with her. He'd still send word, just to let her know he hadn't given into a flight of fancy and run away with Axel... but she'd know he'd been tempted. He'd be tempted every time Axel came back to see him.

But he would come back. Roxas didn't doubt it. One day, he'd come to the Kingdom with a beating
heart, and Roxas would show him everything he'd missed in its absence. There was no telling whether Axel would give up a life of piracy, then, but he probably had time to convince him if a conscience didn't do that on its own.

If anything or anyone could, Roxas knew it would be him... and as much as he would miss the gold, knowing Axel's feelings for him were real – whatever those feelings wound up being, although he had a safe guess – would be well worth it.

When he climbed into his bed for the night, he found the sheets still radiant with warmth. Roxas wrapped them tight around himself. The Ship That Never Was would be departing by moonlight, and although he couldn't possibly see it from his window, he watched the sea until his eyelids were heavy, and the thrum of his heartbeat rocked him to sleep like a lullaby.

The wind whistled through a sliver in the windowpane as it changed.

Chapter End Notes

AND SO CONCLUDES THIS STORY... but not the universe it takes place in! Keep an eye out for more tales within our pirate universe, if you're interested, or you can follow our tumblr (lanternjawedstudmuffin.tumblr.com) for any fic-related news! We also have other KH stuff around there for all your fandom needs.

We hope you enjoyed this story as much as we enjoyed writing it, and if you already miss it, you can marathon Pirates of the Caribbean. It's practically the same story, with less sex.

Thank you to EVERYONE who took the time to leave kudos, comments, make tumblr posts or otherwise express appreciation or opinions on our work! It's meant the world to us, kept us going through some difficult times, and inspired us to keep writing. Please continue to be your awesome selves and feel free to drop more comments here, or hit us up through our tumblr askbox!

And thank you everyone who has been with us this past year. Whether you were there from the first chapter, you discovered the fic after it was completed, or you came in somewhere along the way, we're so grateful you read far enough that you're seeing this note now. It has been a wild year, and we're so glad we started this fic to kick off our lives on Ao3!

We love you all. Stud & Muffin out.
<3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!