| Rating: | **Teen And Up Audiences** |
| Archive Warning: | **Major Character Death, Graphic Depictions Of Violence** |
| Category: | **Gen, Multi, Other** |
| Fandom: | **Kingdom Hearts** |
| Relationship: | **Kairi/Riku/Sora, Kairi & Riku & Sora, Kairi/Naminé, Naminé/Sora, Axel & Naminé, Naminé/Riku Replica, Lexaeus & Zexion, Zexion & Namine, Mickey Mouse & Riku, Kairi & Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Kairi/Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Kairi & Riku (Kingdom Hearts), Kairi/Riku (Kingdom Hearts), Della Duck & Donald Duck, Sora & Kairi & Donald Duck & Goofy, Sora & Naminé & Donald Duck & Goofy** |
| Character: | **Kairi (Kingdom Hearts), Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Namine, Riku (Kingdom Hearts), Riku Replica, Donald Duck, Goofy (Disney), Mickey Mouse, Axel (Kingdom Hearts), Marluxia, Larxene, Zexion, Lexaeus, Vexen, Dusk (Kingdom Hearts), Castle Oblivion - Character, Maleficent (Kingdom Hearts)** |
| Additional Tags: | **Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, POV Multiple, Memory Alteration, Memory Magic, Canon-Typical Violence, Canonical Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Implied/Referenced Abuse, Suggestive Themes, Awkwardness, Body Horror, Spoilers, Polyamory, no beta we die like men Norting, Trans Axel (Kingdom Hearts), Sharing a Body, Implied Childhood Sexual Abuse, Non-Consensual Kissing** |
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### Chains of Waves

**by unnoun**

#### Summary

Sora, Goofy, Kairi and Donald continue their search for the King and Riku, but end up captivated by memories of a lost childhood friend. Will they persevere, or be entrapped by the wiles of a Witch?

(Alternatively: is it cheating if you fall in love with yourself?)

#### Notes

See the end of the work for **notes**
Chapter Notes

So writing the card battle system was literally hell so I'm not doing it, sorry!

As always, I'm using bits and pieces from the games (both Re:Chain and GBA) and the manga and novels! With credit to Nomura, Osaka Team, Shiro Amano, Tomoco Kanemaki, Yen Press and others!

Kairi and Sora woke up at the same time, their arms and legs tangled in each other as they startled awake, their foreheads thudding as they bumped into each other.

Both winced then got up slowly, as Donald and Goofy snored. They walked side by side, tip toeing over to the crossroads on the hill. They looked up at the moon overhead.

"...Will we really be able to find Riku and King Mickey?" they both said softly before looking at each other in surprise, not realizing they were speaking aloud.

The paths here kept going endlessly. They'd stopped for the night when they'd gotten here, to where these paths intersected, because of how hard it was to tell which one might lead to where they wanted to go.

Not that they knew that either.

"Ahead lies something you need."

They turned at once and saw someone in a black coat behind them. About Kairi's height.

"But to claim it," the cloaked figure said, in a soft and feminine voice, "You must lose something dear."

Upon saying this, the girl vanished in an instant.
"It is done?" asked the hooded man.

"...Yes," said the girl as she sat down at her desk.

The plans were proceeding as intended. The Heroes of light would soon be here.

She ignored the man as he vanished in a flurry of flowers, and set about drawing in her sketchbook.

"Not that I'll get to meet them..." she said bitterly.

Goofy yawned and blinked as he sat up, the kids staring down at him and Donald. "What's goin' on?" he asked as the children continued to babble rapidly, waving their arms in a panic.

Kairi glared (it was cute, but not as cute as Maxie at that age) and Goofy smiled gently.

"They had a bad dream," Donald said dismissively, turning back over.

"No! They said there's something on the path ahead!" Kairi declared.

"Who?" Jiminy asked, as he hopped out of the grass, a miniature roll of toilet paper in his hand.

"What sort of feller was he?" Goofy asked.

Kairi shook her head. "It was a girl's voice, but she was wearing a black coat and a hood like that guy we saw in Hollow Bastion. Same style."
"Maybe it was a boy, like Sora before his voice started cracking," Donald suggested.

Sora glared but didn't rise to the bait. Donald rolled his eyes.

"Well then, where'd she go?" Donald asked impatiently.

They looked around, and noticed that instead of the intersection of roads they had been sleeping next to, there was now only a single path.

Goofy and Donald blinked. "Gawrsh..."

"...It's probably a trap," Sora mumbled, his voice hoarse.

"Do we have any other options?" Kairi asked.

"Let's go!" Donald announced suddenly, immediately setting off, breaking into a run.

Sora and Kairi glanced at each other then set off after him, Jiminy clinging to Goofy as he made up the rear of the impromptu race.

They eventually had to stop when the path brought them to a massive castle, bigger than any that any of them had ever seen. The path continued right up to the castle's doors, as the ground alongside that path vanished. Donald stuck his head over the edge of the road, and found that there was no ground underneath the pathway either.

The sky was now black and grey, not a star to be seen.

Kairi had a strange feeling as she looked at the green spires sticking out in all directions.
She bit her lip and walked towards the front doors and pushed them open, the others trailing behind her.

"Looks like nobody's home," Donald commented as they stepped inside the hallway.

"You sure we should just barge in like this?" Goofy asked, trying to step carefully so as not to track dirt on the bright white marble floors.

Donald shrugged. "We have to if we're gonna find the king..." he said with finality, as the others stared at him in shock for voicing aloud what they'd only briefly considered.

Goofy started looking around at all the walls. "The king?! King Mickey's here?"

Donald blinked, as if realizing what he'd insinuated before nodding. "Something just told me he'd be here, okay?"

Goofy stared. "Really? 'Cause now that ya mention it, I was kinda thinkin' the same thing."

"Are you serious?" Sora said, "So was I! One look at this castle, and I just knew: They're here." His voice came out at least an octave deeper. The others all stared at him, their heads tilted to the side.

"...What?" he said defensively.

Goofy broke the silence first. "A-hyuck! Guess great minds think alike."

Kairi blinked as she came back to the conversation. "But, I thought Riku would be here too."

Jiminy nodded. "Me too! It can't just be a coincidence."

They all frowned at this. "Gawrsh, maybe it's contagious," Goofy suggested.
Donald shook his head. "No, no. Something's screwy. We gotta go take a look."

"All right," Sora said, as he continued into the hall.

"Wak! Where are you going!?!" Donald shouted.

Sora looked back with a grin. "To take a look. Are ya scared?"

Donald scowled. "Aw, don't be ridiculous! Come on, let's go, Goofy!"

"Hey, fellas, shouldn't we shut the door behind us before we go?" Goofy asked as the others headed towards the door at the end of the hall.

"Sora!"

They turned to see Goofy pointing at the door as it slid closed, as a man in a black coat and a hood stood in front of it.

"Wak! Heartless!" Donald cried, before pulling out his staff. "Let's see ya handle my magic! THUNDAZA!" Donald lifted his staff into the air, only for nothing to happen.

Everyone stared at Donald. "Thundaga!" he tried again. "Come on! Blizzaza! Fira!?!"

He shook his wand as if it would start. "Why isn't it working?"

The man in the black coat stared at them. "For your information, I am not a Heartless. Haven't you figured it out? The moment you set foot in this castle, you stared losing your memory. You've forgotten every spell and ability you knew."

Kairi gasped. "Does that mean if we try a dodge roll now it'll just be a normal somersault?!"
The man stared at her. "...I don't really care. In this place to find is to lose, and to lose is to find. That is the way of things in Castle Oblivion."

Goofy started singing lowly under his breath. "A, B, C, E, F, G;"

"...Uh, Goofy?"

"Excuse me, I'm talking!" the man said, suddenly impatient.

"Castle Oblivion?" Kairi asked politely.

The man nodded. "Yes. Here you will meet people you know. People you miss."

"You mean Riku!?" Sora shouted. "Riku's here!?"

"And the king?!" added Donald.

The man looked at him. "Do you want to find them?"

"Of course!" Kairi yelled.

"If that's what you want..." Suddenly the man walked through them- straight through their bodies.

Kairi shivered at the sensation. Something felt distinctly wrong about it.

"I just touched your memories. And I made this. To reunite with those you hold dear." He tossed something to Sora. It was a card shaped like a crown, illustrated with a picture of a small city on the front.
"A card?" Kairi asked.

"A promise, for the reunion you seek. Hold the card aloft and the door will open, a new world beyond it. Let the cards be your guide."

"...Guide?"

"Proceed. To lose and to claim anew, or to claim anew only to lose." With that said, the man disappeared.

Sora nodded. "C'mon guys, let's go!"

Holding the card in his hand, the door shone bright and the quartet walked through.

The girl in black drew quietly, sketching a face not unlike her own, hair scarlet instead of gold. As she drew, suddenly her crayon fell out of her hand.

She blinked. She had removed her glove when she had started drawing, and so when she saw her hand, the skin pale as the walls around her, she noticed her fingers were almost completely see-through. Like she wasn't even there at all.

She stared, and willed herself to remain solid and tangible, carefully gripping the crayon in her hand, her fingers tightening, her wrist shaking with the effort and the strain.

No, she thought. I won't fade away.

She continued to draw, and as she captured the memories to paper and wax, she felt her head starting to pound and ache and hurt, as the world around her blurred and spun and faded.

She gritted her teeth, forcing herself to stay awake, and took the link of memory she was working on and pulled it into herself. Just for safety, she reassured herself. Certainly not to steal the past of another where she had none of her own, right?
"This is..."

"Traverse Town!"

They stepped into Traverse Town's first district. Cobblestone roads, buildings made of wood and stone, and warm orange streetlamps.

Kairi frowned. "Where are Aerith and Leon?"

"Didn't they all go back to Hollow Bastion?"

"Oh yeah..." Kairi rubbed the back of her head sheepishly.

"Besides, we're still in Castle Oblivion, aren't we?" Goofy pointed out, glancing at the still open door behind them, and the white hallway beyond.

"Precisely," said a low voice behind Kairi. "It isn't reality that you see. This town is an illusion conceived by your memories ingrained in that card."

Kairi turned and summoned Destiny's Embrace, the man in the black coat stepping back from her. "What do you mean about our memories?!" she demanded.

"I'll leave that to your imagination. In this castle, you can only move forward using the cards to open the doors. And you may stumble upon memories that were hidden or people who are dear to you..."

The man vanished once more, petals drifting in his wake and lightly dusting the ground.
Goofy's stomach growled as a warm aroma wafted through the air.

"Would you take this seriously!" Donald snapped.

"Sorry," Goofy said "It's just that somethin' smells really good!"

Kairi nodded. "We haven't eaten anything decent for a while."

They looked and saw a sign on the side of the square marked "French Cafe" with a bunch of tables and chairs in open air under an awning.

"How can you be so easy going?" Donald yelled.

Sora shrugged. "Well, we don't know what to expect. And they say 'an army marches on its stomach'."

Kairi nodded as she pulled out one of the chairs. "I've always wanted to try this place out."

"Your curiosity could put us in danger!" Jiminy yelled while jumping on the table.

Donald sighed and pulled out a menu, as Jiminy gave up. "I'm used to being ignored. I'm just a little old conscience."

The candles went out, leaving them in the dark.

"What's going on!?" Jiminy cried.

Sora grinned "Maybe the waiters are gonna come out and sing a surprise 'Happy Birthday' for us. Heh," he suggested.

"That's not funny, Sora!" Jiminy shouted as he hid behind Kairi as a bunch of Shadows appeared.
Sora blocked one with his keyblade but scowled at how awkward the movement was. His muscles weren’t responding the way he wanted them to, the way he would have thought would be habit.

Donald held his staff over head "SAND...wich?!" he cried as the Heartless dogpiled him. "Wak! I forgot that I forgot my magic!"

Goofy swung at one of the Heartless around Donald, and Kairi awkwardly swung her weapon overhead into one of the enemies, causing the creatures to scatter around the duck.

"Fire!" Donald finally cried once he was free, and a tiny fireball left his wand.

"We've lost a lot of our power," Kairi commented.

"We must've gone back to where we started!" Goofy said.

"Right. When we all met," Sora said.

Donald frowned. "But Kairi wasn't there!"

Kairi put her hands on her hips. "Yes I was! The whole time." She put her arms at the back of her head and leaned back at the same time as Sora did the same. Donald shuddered involuntarily. The similarities in their mannerisms were uncanny.

"Woof! Woof!"

"Huh- OOF!"

Kairi was knocked to the ground by an orange dog in a green collar, his paws on her midriff, licking all over her face.

"Pluto!?" Sora said.
"What's Pluto doing here?" Donald asked.

Goofy frowned. "We had Pluto with us when we came to Traverse Town, didn't we?"

Sora frowned as well, "But we were chasing Pluto when we got here, weren't we?"

Kairi giggled as he continued to lick her face. "Get him off of me!"

"I don't think this is really Traverse Town anyway," Jiminy noted. "Just an illusion made in Castle Oblivion."

Sora grabbed his head. "Aaghh! Who cares about all that? It's too confusing! I don't know where we are, but let's just keep moving forward defeating Heartless! We'll get somewhere!"

More Heartless appeared, and were cut down by a swipe from a sword and an explosion. "Think like that, and you're as good as Heartless fodder."

They all gaped at the man in the leather jacket as he strolled towards them, and Pluto finally left Kairi and ran towards the man.

"LEON!?" they all cried.

Leon blinked but still snapped his fingers and whistled and pointed as Pluto bound up to him. The dog sat immediately and started wagging his tail. "How do you know my name? I've never seen any of you before in my life."

Kairi sat up. "What? But. We all fought the Heartless together!"

"Yeah, quit playing Leon!" said Sora.

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even know your names," Leon said.
Goofy looked like he was going to cry. "You don't?" he asked.

Leon shook his head. "Sorry."

Sora pouted. "I can't believe it. How can you have forgotten about us?"

"Hey, I feel for you. But you've got the wrong guy. Happens all the time. Don't take it so personally, Sora," Leon said with a shrug.

Kairi gasped. "You do know his name!" Kairi pointed her finger at him accusingly.

Leon froze where he stood, and the color drained from his face. "Now, now hold on! Why do I know your name? I've never met you or Kairi before-"

"You think Leon's just kidding around?" Goofy whispered loudly.

"If he is it's not funny! Sora's really upset," Donald said.

Leon glared. "Who's kidding around, Goofy? You and Donald are the ones who---"

"Hey!" Donald interrupted.

Leon stood stock still, his face shadowed by his bangs as he put his hand to his head. "I don't get it... Something's wrong with my memory. What's happening here?"

"I dunno, Leon. Maybe Aerith was onto something after all."

Yuffie walked over from the alleyway. "She said she sensed some uncanny kind of power. And asked us to look into it. Well, this is as uncanny as it gets. Maybe you should take Sora and the others to see Aerith."
Sora grinned. "Yuffie! You know my name!"

Yuffie grinned back. "Yep! Looks like you know mine, too."

Leon glanced at the ninja. "You know him?"

Yuffie shook her head, her short black hair bouncing as she did so. "Nope! Total stranger. But I definitely know his name. Strange, yes, but convenient! We can skip the introductions."

Leon put his hand back to his face, rubbing his forehead as if he was in pain. "How is it that you can accept this situation so easily? I don't get you..."

Yuffie seemed not to hear him. "Well, I'm gonna run ahead and fill Aerith in. Leon, you can give them the grand tour!" With that said, she gave Leon a last teasing wave before springing into the air and dashing across the rooftops.

Leon stared after her before sighing and sticking his gunblade in a loop made by a pair of his belts. "I guess it's no use dwelling on it. Come on, follow me." He walked briskly further into the First District as the others followed him.

"We're going to the hotel in the Second District, right?" Kairi asked.

"You even know that?"

"Not really, it was just a guess." Kairi raised her hands defensively, taking a step back from the swordsman. She'd been with Sora when he'd fought Leon and didn't want to fight him herself. Her body bruised more easily than his.

Sora suddenly grinned. "Oh! I know! Hey, Leon!"

"What?"
"Maybe you'll remember if we fight!"

Leon stopped midstep and looked at Sora skeptically. "You want to fight me?"

"You guys sit this out," Sora told the others as he summoned his keyblade. "The first time I saw Leon, I fought him on my own."

"Oh yeah! Ahyuck! 'Cos you hadn't met us yet!"

Kairi joined the others as they moved against one of the walls. Kairi sat on the ledge against the postcard box, and Pluto trotted over and put his head in her lap, as she gently petted behind his ears. "So are you the real Pluto, or...?" she asked gently before trailing off.

Leon looked at Sora's stance doubtfully. "Are you sure about this? I don't think this will be much of a fight." He drew his gunblade again slowly.

Sora nodded with a grin.

"All right. Have it your way."

Sora jumped and swung as hard as he could, but Leon spun his weapon in a circle and deflected the blow effortlessly.

Sora landed a step back and lunged forward again, but this time as the weapons collided Leon's gunblade shook and exploded with force, knocking Sora onto his rear and the keyblade out of his hand.

Kairi winced. Sora did even worse than the first time when he'd passed out.

"Don't be so reckless. You get the picture by now, don't you?" Leon put away the gunblade and reached out with his hand to help Sora up.

"You guys really don't know how to fight," Leon stated.
"We just forgot." Kairi pouted.

"Forgot? How do you forget something like that?" The quartet considered the question but couldn't come up with an answer. They only managed to cock their heads to the side.

Leon shrugged. "Let's go see Aerith. We'll talk more there." With that Leon turned and kept walking, before stopping. "Oh. Here, I found this lying around. You take it." He handed Kairi a blue card with the face of a lion on the front.

They arrived in the same room in the Second District hotel where Leon and Yuffie had first told Sora about the Heartless.

Yuffie was sitting on the bed, idly kicking her legs. Aerith sat at the table with a quiet smile on her face. "Aerith, tell me you haven't forgotten us too," Kairi asked.

"I don't know whether to say 'Nice to meet you' or 'Good to see you again.' I don't think I know you, but I still feel like you belong here," said Aerith. "My heart says we've met before... but I don't remember you, Kairi."

Yuffie nodded. "Yeah, exactly! Like, we've never met, but it still doesn't feel weird that I know your name."

"But I'm telling you, we HAVE met," Sora insisted. "We took on the Heartless together. We were a team!"

Leon crossed his arms in front of him as he leaned against the wall. "It feels like you're right," he admitted. "But I can't remember."

"Then I guess you won't remember what you told me," Sora said. "In Hollow Bastion, when I sealed the Keyhole: 'We may never meet again...""
"...But we'll never forget each other," Leon finished reluctantly.

Kairi smiled. "See! You do remember!"

Yuffie gasped. "They're right, Leon! I remember you saying that too."

Leon frowned and held his head in his hands. Maybe she was imagining it, but he looked... wait, was that smoke coming out of his head? "I guess we can't write it off as a coincidence..." Leon muttered.

Aerith stepped up to Kairi looked her in the eyes before doing the same to Sora.

"We don't know any of you," she said. "But your hearts are full of memories of all of us together. Those memories must resonate in our hearts too. Maybe they tell us things we couldn't otherwise know."

"So you're saying that their memories are affecting ours?" Leon asked.

Aerith nodded with a smile. "Their memories do seem to have a certain power."

"Maybe it's like that guy said, then... This town is just an illusion, something my memories created." Sora frowned, his head bowed in thought.

Aerith turned back towards them. "And there's someone special to you in this town?"

Kairi blinked. "How did you know?"

Sora just nodded. "Oh... I get it. My memories are resonating in your heart, telling you what happened." It made sense, at least. "A friend of ours is somewhere in this town- I mean, in Castle Oblivion," Sora told her.
"Huh? Castle Oblivion?" Yuffie asked. "What's that? There aren't any castles around here."

"That's not quite what he means," Kairi said.

"You're still not sure what's going on yourselves," Aerith prompted gently. "Right?"

"Right. We just got here after all." Sora nodded. "I want to have a better look around."

"Then go have a look around," Leon said. "There's Heartless, but that shouldn't be a problem for you."

Sora grinned cockily. "So, you know I can fight?"

Leon snorted. "I can't say I know, but I feel like believing you. Let's leave it at that."

As they walked across the Second District's square, Goofy frowned and thought with his hand on his chin. "So you were sayin' this town's just an illusion from your memories, right? But what's that mean?"

Sora shrugged. "I don't really know. It just seems like this world is connected to my memories somehow."

Kairi nodded. "Mine too."

"But it can't be an illusion!" Donald shouted, baffled. "We're standing right in it!"

"Gee, what about me and Donald?" said Goofy. "Are we from your memories, too?"

"I'm pretty sure Pluto is," Kairi noted as she scratched the likely illusory dog behind the ears. "He doesn't have the letter he was carrying earlier."
"But what if that Pluto wasn't real either?" Sora asked. "Maybe it was just a dream?"

Kairi stared at him. "...My head hurts."

Goofy sighed. "None of this makes a whole lotta sense."

Donald jumped suddenly. "Heartless!"

Several Soldiers appeared in the middle of the square.

"You're all so weak now..." Jiminy bemoaned, hiding behind Sora's spikes.

Sora shrugged. "We've just gotta practice, that's all!"

Sora smirked as he cut through the last Large Body. "See, what'd I tell ya!?" he twirled his keyblade around as he boasted at the others panting out of breath. "Don't you guys feel like we've got a better handle on things now?"

Kairi paled as she stared behind him. She stepped back and her hand was shaking as she pointed over his shoulder. Behind Sora was a pink monkey with a slingshot in its hand. As it stared the keyblade master down, a bunch of other identical creatures started teleporting in.

Jiminy froze. "Sniperwilds!"

"Retreat!"

As one they all sprinted towards the Third District, as more Heartless teleported into their path, shooting nuts and bananas hard enough to leave welts and bruises.
"AAAHHH!"

"OW!"

"OUCH!"

"NOOO!"

"WAK!"

"YAAAA-HOO-HOO-HOO-HOOEY!"

"WHOA!" As he saw a familiar face, Sora slid to a stop, and Kairi crashed into him, Goofy and Donald following up behind.

"Hey, whaddaya know. It's Sora!" Cid smiled widely, then his smile faded to a look of confusion as he scratched the back of his head. "Wait, what am I saying? I don't know you. But you do LOOK like a Sora, what with the spiky hair and baggy pants... Guess I just call 'em like I see 'em."

Sora grinned. "It's okay Cid. That's my name."

Cid smirked and thumbed his nose. "So you've heard of me! Well, I can't say as I'm surprised." He preened cockily and Kairi rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, maybe you can help us out," Kairi said. "Some friends of ours are supposed to be somewhere in this castle--er, town. Got any ideas?"

Cid furrowed his brow in thought. "Your friend, huh? Lately all this town sees is Heartless. Can't
take two steps without getting ambushed. And this plaza's the worst."

Cid looked up at the bell tower of the Second District's gizmo shop. "Word is we'll have a jumbo-sized Heartless on our hands when that bell rings. If you value your hide, you'll get out of here while the gettin's good." With that said, Cid walked off back to the First District.

Goofy started stepping backward. "Gawrsh, maybe we should leave too."

"Don't you wanna see the Heartless?" Sora said.

"No, we don't!" Donald snapped.

Suddenly, the bell tolled. Donald jumped. "The bell! Let's get outta here!"

The earth rumbled, and hunks of metal fell out of the sky before coming together into a large Heartless formed from many floating pieces.

The Guard Armor.

"Run!" Donald scrambled away only to bump into an invisible wall.

"Come on Donald!" Kairi cried as she jumped at the creature's hand and stabbed her keyblade down into it.

The feet stomped and kicked, knocking Donald around as until Goofy caught him and protected him. "We need your magic!" Goofy insisted.

Donald blinked up at the large Heartless, and raised his wand. "Fire?" he tried, and was answered with a fireball.

"Blizzard?" A cone of ice shards impacted every piece of the large Heartless.
Donald nodded. "Alright!"

Sora smacked the closest foot and spun around swinging his keyblade with one hand "Ha!" he cried, knocking the limb to the ground where it vanished into a puff of smoke.

Goofy slapped one of the claws with the face of his shield, knocking it towards Kairi, who swung her keyblade to hit it back to him. Together they batted the claw back and forth until Kairi pierced its wrist with her keyblade and used it as an improvised weapon to slash and rake the torso with before the hand disappeared completely.

Donald jumped and swung his staff into the creature's head as it floated down towards him, and Sora grinned as he spun around to catch it while it was dazed. He and Kairi jumped at the same moment, and their keyblades pierced through the creature's body. It shook for a moment, before the torso collapsed to the ground and faded to light.

"So your friend wasn't here?"

They paused at the door to the Zero District, where Merlin's house had been before. Kairi looked behind her to see Yuffie and the others, all smiling apologetically.

"No, I don't think I'll find him in this town," Sora replied. "But he's somewhere in this castle. I just know it."

Cid rolled his eyes. "Castle? Like this whole town's inside some humongous castle? Hoo, that's rich!" Leon clapped his hand onto the pilot's shoulder.

"We might not be able to understand it Cid," Leon said. "But Sora and his friends do. They can see that reality is bigger than just this town."

"I wish I could be so sure," Kairi mumbled.
"You'll be okay, Kairi," Leon said firmly. "No matter what shape reality takes, you four can handle it."

"Take care, kids! Stay out of trouble!"

"I'm a little lost, but best of luck anyway."

They accepted the hugs and well wishes until eventually the old friends dispersed and left. Donald and Goofy returned to the door and passed on through.

"Wait."

Sora and Kairi turned and saw Aerith looking somehow incredibly sad. "What's wrong?" Kairi asked.

"I don't have all the answers, but there's something I thought you should know. Your memories created this town, right?"

"That's what the guy who gave me the card said."

"If that's true," said Aerith, "then this town is just a figment of your mind...and so are we."

Sora's eyes widened. "But...you can't be a figment! You're standing right here. The town is here, too!"

"But I'm not really me. I don't remember the things I should. I sense things I shouldn't."

Kairi frowned, thinking hard. "But..."

"Beware your memories," Aerith said slowly. "In the journey to come, you'll be faced with more illusions. Sometimes the shadows of your memory will deceive you, try to lead you astray."
Sora blinked. "So, uh...what exactly does that mean?"

Aerith looked down at the ground and shrugged helplessly. "I'm just another illusion, Sora. The truth is out of my reach."

"Don't say stuff like that. It's depressing..."

Aerith slapped him, and grabbed Kairi by the shoulder. "No! You mustn't let illusions distract you from what's truly important."

"Sora!"

"Kairi!"

"Be right there," Kairi mumbled, before she noticed a weight on her shoulder had simply vanished.

"Aerith?" Sora and Kairi asked at once.

Donald frowned in exasperation. "Aerith left with Leon and the others, remember?"

Goofy leaned in and started checking both of their faces. "We were gettin' worried. The two of you were just standin' there all by yourselves."

"...Let's go," Sora said.

The girl sighed. It seemed like people only cared about her drawings when she drew what they wanted her to draw.
But still. She had to draw. Maybe if she kept drawing...

...Maybe her wishes could still come true.

So she led the boy and girl up through the castle. Maybe they would like her drawings? Someone had to, right?

"It's just like the last floor," Kairi noted.

"I think it's a little different," Sora said.

Before they could continue the two teens bumped into a black-clad torso. "Oops, pardon me."

They were both dragged back by Donald and Goofy as the man in black stood in front of them unfazed. "Well, did you enjoy meeting your memories?"

"It was good to see everyone again," Kairi said.

"But what do you want from us?" Sora demanded.

"That depends on what you have to give," the man said stepping forward.

They summoned their keyblades, as the scent of flowers in the air intensified.

"Boo."

All of a sudden there was another man in the room in the same black coat with the hood down, his hair a mess of bright red spikes. His eyes were green, and he had black teardrop-like triangles
The hooded man froze, his posture suddenly stiffening. "What do you want?" he asked, sounding distinctly unhappy.

"I got bored, what with you hogging the hero," the newcomer snarked.

The hooded man tossed a card to the redhead. "Then perhaps you'd like to test him?"

"Perhaps I would." The red-haired man gave a smirk and a wave as the original disappeared into darkness.

"My show now, keyblade masters. My name's Axel. Got it memorized?"

Kairi blinked. "Uh... sure?" Sora nodded.

"Good. You kids learn quick. So, Sora, Kairi, now that we're on a first-name basis..."

Axel smiled at the corners of his mouth, his arms spread wide as an eight-pointed wheel appeared in each of his hands; a pair of spiked chakrams. "...Don't go dying on me!"

They readied their weapons as Axel threw one of his chakrams, Sora dodging to one side of it and Kairi rolling to the other. As they both charged at him they swung from both sides, only for him to vanish into darkness. Instead they ended up hitting each other in the cheek.

"Agh!" Sora cried, hitting the wall from the force of the swing, as Kairi fell over and passed out.

"Cure!" Donald cast on the two, before turning to point his wand towards Axel. "Fire!" he yelled.

Axel spread his arms and took the fireball in the center of his chest. "Ooh!~" he moaned flirtatiously. "That feels good." He moved his right arm up lazily, gripping the chakram in it by only his little and ring fingers. "Aren't ya gonna buy me dinner first?" his smirk widened by a fraction. "I'm in the mood for ROAST DUCK!"
With a snap of his fingers, a wall of flame divided the hallway with Donald in the middle, the roar of the flames and Donald's pained screams overwhelming any other sound.

"I'm coming Donald!" Goofy shouted as he charged through the flames with his shield in front of him, grabbing the duck by the wing and slamming his shield into Axel's jaw as the redheaded man's eyes widened in surprise.

Kairi jumped through the wall of fire and pushed off of Goofy's head to get extra distance in the air and swung her weapon upward to club Axel towards the ceiling. Finally, Sora slammed his keyblade into Axel's back, knocking him down into the floor.

Seemingly unharmed, Axel rolled forward onto his feet, and swung at Kairi with one arm as she charged towards him, sweeping his leg around hers to knock her off balance. Unfortunately it didn't work, and he found her feet immovable, leading him to have to bring his other chakram around to parry her counter attack, his arm bending against his torso as she pushed against his guard. Desperately, he threw his first chakram towards her, but instead of backing off she simply leaned her head to the side, seemingly not caring about the weapon as it flew by, cutting and singing her hair.

"Who are you?" Kairi asked.

As Axel's elbow dug into his ribs his face twisted into an expression of mock hurt. "Aw, you don't remember me Kairi?" He tutted condescendingly and smirked. "But what about all those good times we had together? All the times I used to save you?"

"You know me?" Kairi asked, surprised. Axel tried to push her away and found that she wasn't budging.

"Why, sure! We used to be best pals after all..."

Suddenly Kairi's eyes widened in surprised recognition. "Did you used to be that dumb babysitter?"

The girl at the top of the castle whistled as she sketched the latest drawing, a pair of redheads, a
teenager with green eyes and a toddler whose irises were indigo. The little girl was stomping on the foot of the older boy, the boy's blue-haired best friend doubtlessly somewhere in the background rolling his eyes.

It's not like all the hidden memories she showed them had to be fake, right?

She whistled for another bar before singing softly. *"Just whistle while you work~"

Axel blinked and she stomped on his foot, and swung her keyblade into the side of his face. He spun his chakrams around as he fell back, catching her in the midriff and surprising her with a burst of flame that sent her flying onto her rear.

Sora jumped and slashed at Axel, hitting the taller man in the shoulder, and as Axel spun to retaliate, Sora slapped him in the ribs and across the knee.

Donald started attacking Axel with shards of ice, and as he warped away from the frozen onslaught he found he ended up having to drag an extra weight on his leg.

In Betwixt and Between, Axel looked down and saw Kairi with her arm wrapped around his leg, her keyblade pointing at his face. *"Water".*

Kairi appeared out of a dark portal and fell back to the ground, a few cards clutched in her hand. The group looked around and helped Kairi to her feet, and sighed in relief when Axel failed to reappear.

"More cards?" Goofy wondered aloud.

"Like the one that made Traverse Town?" Jiminy suggested.

"Correct."
They looked up, and saw Axel leaning calmly against one of the pillars of the wall. His hair was wet, but he otherwise seemed unharmed.

"Axel!"

Axel shrugged. "After an introduction like that, you don't think I'd just give up the ghost?"

"You were just testing us," Kairi accused.

Axel grinned. "You passed! Congrats. You're ready to take on Castle Oblivion. Follow your memories. Trust what you remember, seek what you forget...and you will find someone very special."

"You mean Riku and the king?" Goofy asked before anyone else could.

"Well, I don't know. You'll just have to give some more thought to who's most important to you. Our most precious memories lie deep in our hearts, out of reach. But you both can find yours, Sora, Kairi."

"Where? How?" Sora demanded.

"The light within the darkness. You've lost sight of it, you both have. You've forgotten forgetting."

"The light within darkness?" Kairi muttered. Why did that sound so familiar?

Axel held out his hand in a way that was agonizingly familiar. "Would you like a hint?"

Goofy frowned. "Gawrsh, do ya need it?"

Sora shook his head resolutely. "No, I want to figure it out for myself. And if you get in my way ___"
Donald raised his wand. "He won't. We won't let him!"

Axel smiled at that and let his hand drop. "That's my kind of answer. Just what I'd expect from a Keyblade master. But be forewarned... When your sleeping memories awaken, you may no longer be you."

He left with that, vanishing as if he was never there at all.
Chapter Notes

Wow this chapter's late. Sorry, been busy with work and personal stuff.

And, from a writing perspective, been trying to figure out just what the hell I'm doing with the Disney worlds. On the one hand, most of them in Chain aren't very good. On the other hand, I need filler. On the other other hand, some of them are REALLY good, I thought.

And I love writing for Hades. Which I haven't done this chapter! And writing Genie isn't as fun. It just makes me sad. :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well said, Riku.

Riku blinked back the tears as he opened his eyes and sat up. In one hand he held a card, in the other a star made of shells with a face drawn on it.

He gazed at the charm, and thought back and reminisced about all of the stories he'd always heard about Wayfinders. About good luck to sailors on journeys. About being able to find the way home to one's friends, family or lovers.

Kairi gave him this at the door, and it wasn't hard to figure out why.

He glanced at the door at the other hand of the shining white marble hall. He looked back and saw only a solid white wall behind him.

Only one way to go.

"Hmm..."

"What's up Jiminy?" Kairi asked.
"What Axel said's been bothering me..." Jiminy said. "What could he have meant by 'you may no longer be you'?

Sora simply shrugged. "Come on. How can I be anyone besides me?"

Jiminy nodded. "I know, I know."

Kairi frowned in thought, distracted. She couldn't stop thinking about the other thing Axel had said. The light in the darkness? Why does that sound so familiar? "We still need to be careful though."

Goofy nodded. "Yep. Seems like anything could happen here in Castle Oblibbity..." Goofy paused. "...Uh, Oblostomy? Osteoporosis?"

"Oblivion!" Donald said with surprising patience.

"Right, what you said."

Sora shrugged again. "We'll be fine. Whatever they're cooking up, together we can handle it."

Goofy suddenly brightened up. "Hey, remember that other castle we explored together? With all the contraptions?"

Kairi blinked. She couldn't think of anything with that description. "We've been to another castle?"

"When was that?" Sora asked.

Donald frowned. "Contraptions? I don't remember a castle like that. What was it called."

Goofy blinked. "Gawrsh, what was it again? Holla...? Holly? Holler..." Goofy stood still with his arms crossed. "Sorry, I can't remember."
Donald stomped his foot. "Wak! Stop goofing around!"

"You sure you didn't make it up?" Sora asked.

Goofy continued in intense thought. "I don't think so..."

Riku stood on the balcony of Hollow Bastion's entrance hall. Finally, he got impatient at all the running around and snapped.

"Where are the people in my memories?"

Are you sure you want to see them?

Riku hesitated for a moment. "Of course I do."

But you cast them aside, The voice whispered. To reach the outside world, you passed through the door to darkness. Behind you, you left family, friends, home — everything — all in pursuit of darkness.

"But I cast that aside too!" Riku declared.

Then what do you have to show for it? First your home, then the dark. Your heart only knows how to throw things away. It's empty, like that room. Like your memories. That's why no one is in the castle with you. Your heart is hollow except for the darkness you couldn't quite shake off.

Riku grinned at the voice. "You're full of it. I've got one thing out of it. One thing I'll never cast aside."

He dug into his pocket and dug out the lucky charm. It shone brilliantly, and when it was done, there they were. Sora and Kairi, side by side.
He reached for them, then stopped with a frown when his fingers went right through them as they stood there in front of the fountain.

...*Did you really?* The voice sounded like it was gloating.

Riku sighed, then stood up straight and started up the stairs towards the exit of the hall.

As they blinked back the sun, Sora noticed that Pluto was back.

"Hey, where'd you go—"

"Look! Someone's in trouble!"

Sora looked, and already Kairi was charging forward with a yell towards a young man in a purple vest and a fez, surrounded by Heartless.

Sora frowned. He couldn't let her have *all* the fun. He ran in and defended the man as a scimitar sliced down at him. "Looks like you can use some help, Aladdin."

"You're right! It *is* Aladdin!" Donald said.

"And this place must be Agrabah!" said Goofy.

Aladdin nodded and scrambled to his feet, drawing his own weapon. "Thanks! I thought I was done for!"

Kairi held up the card they'd gotten from Leon. "Courage!" There was a flash, and a lion appeared and roared loudly, obliterating several of the Heartless with the force. Sora blasted a Fat Bandit
with a hunk of ice, and Goofy spun around and cut through some Yellow Operas. Once the Heartless were all gone, Kairi helped Aladdin up.

"You guys are pretty tough," Aladdin said. "But how do you know me? Have we met before?"

They all frowned. "No, I don't think so," Kairi admitted.

"Have you seen these two!?" Sora shoved a piece of paper in Aladdin's face, with a pair of drawings on it, one of Mickey, one of Riku.

Aladdin blinked. "Uh, no. Sorry."

The quartet sighed.

Aladdin shrugged, and pulled a brass oil lamp out of his pocket. "I have to get this lamp to the palace, but I promise I'll help you guys out when I'm done."

Kairi looked at it. "Looks kinda dusty..." she remarked.

Aladdin looked down on it and started brushing his fingers across the surface. "Did I get it?"

Suddenly there was an explosion of sound and light as blue smoke erupted from the lamp's spout that formed a torso, arms and a head and a storm of confetti and sparks of light surrounded them. "WOO! WAS STARTIN' TO WORRY I WAS NEVER GETTIN' OUTTA THERE!"

Donald rolled his eyes while Goofy and Kairi clapped politely. "Hey Genie," Sora said with a wave.

Genie got right up into Sora's face. "So YOU'RE the one who rubbed the lamp and set me free!?"

Sora shook his head, and he pointed at Aladdin, who was staring wide-eyed with the lamp still in his hands.
"I was supposed to deliver it to somebody else..." Aladdin mumbled as Genie rushed up to him.

"But you're my master!" Genie declared as he swept Aladdin up in his arms. "So ya better make some wishes!" He glared at Aladdin threateningly as he said this, his eyes suddenly bloodshot.

Meanwhile, a red parrot watching from above held its beak in its wing before flying off back towards the palace. "Jafar!"

Riku frowned as he walked into the castle chapel. "No one's here either. So who am I supposed to meet?"

"Did you think you would meet your friends? Sorry to disappoint you."

Riku glared at the source of the voice, as green flames surrounded the room and a figure in a long robe strode forward. "Maleficent!"

Snarling, Riku summoned Soul Eater to his hand, ready to fight.

Maleficent eyed the weapon dismissively. "What kind of greeting is that? After I took you in like a son...?" She stepped towards him, her arms opened to her sides.

"Don't come any closer," Riku said softly. "Of all the people I could run into, it had to be you."

Maleficent nodded. "But of course. Don't I love you more than anyone else in all these worlds? Here, come closer to me..." Riku stared at her hand as she reached towards him.

Riku slapped her hand aside, and stepped back, as Maleficent laughed and cackled. "What's so funny!" he demanded.
"Your heart is steeped in darkness," she said. "And so you are only able to see those who exist in that same darkness like myself. It's only natural."

Riku stared. as Maleficent went on. "Be grateful you have someone to keep you company. Your heart is empty. If not for darkness lingering there, you would be completely alone."

"I'm not really interested in your company."

Maleficent sniffed. "Is that so? You once turned to me to sate your hunger for the darkness. In the depths of your heart, you must have wished to see me. Who else can grant you the darkness you long for?"

Riku looked to the side. "There was a time I did want you around. I surrendered my heart to the darkness."

Maleficent stood quietly as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a star-shaped charm. "But now I know: you and your darkness have nothing to offer."

He flicked his wrist and Soul Eater came downward, flashing and changing shape, so that the blade was two white shafts connecting into a heart at the top, with a heart shape below the blade at where it met the handle, this lower heart flanked by a pair of tiny crosses to the sides.

Maleficent blinked.

"I'm finished with all that," Riku declared, holding the star charm in front of him as it and his transformed blade shone. "If I'm stuck seeing people like you, people of the dark... I'll take you out, one by one."

He lunged at Maleficent, but found her staff intercepted his blow. "Then you mustn't forget to destroy yourself last. You are as much of the dark as I."

"Fine! I turned to darkness because my heart was weak. I hate that weakness!" He jumped back, before running in to attack again.
The tip of his blade grazed Maleficent's chin, but the fairy seemed unfazed. "So you hate the darkness enough to think only you can fight it?" She tsked as pity shone in her eyes. "How your heart must be suffering. I can almost feel it myself."

"SHUT UP!"

Maleficent's expression flashed to anger, and, for a moment, her features seemed to change, becoming more draconian—but it passed, and she simply stood before him, head held high as she allowed him to strike through her. "The one thing you wish for with all your heart is darkness," she whispered, fire licking at the corners of her mouth. She reached out, her arm shaking, and clasped her fingers around his free hand, curling his own even tighter against Kairi's lucky charm. "...But all the same," she smiled softly at him, as he stared, horrified. "Keep searching for your light. The closer you get to it, the greater your own shadow will grow."

Flames engulfed her, and as she faded to nothing he swore he could hear a last set of words hiss past her lips. "I'm proud of you."

"Now! Genies! I wish the princess will fall madly in love with me!"

Kairi stared, as her jaw fell open and the turban shifted on her head. "But you're so old."

"DO AS I SAY!" Jafar commanded.

She glanced at Sora, then at Donald, then Goofy. They nodded.

"ATTACK!"

Jafar jumped in surprise, as Jasmine slashed at the Fat Bandit holding her with her crown and ran to stand behind Aladdin.

"You aren't genies at all! You street rats think you can trick me!? How dare—"
"Sorry I'm late!"

Kairi blinked as Genie appeared in the palace's thrown room.

*Aladdin smiled as he held the lamp in his hands, dressed as a prince with fine white clothes. "I wish for your freedom, Genie."*

*Genie stared as the manacles around his wrists vanished, and tears welled up in his eyes.*

"...So what are we gonna do about that vizier guy?"

"What are you doing ba—" Kairi's mouth zipped closed as Genie snapped his fingers.

Jafar blinked at this display of magic. "So you're the real deal this time?" He questioned suspiciously.

Genie grinned and pointed his fingers at Jafar and Iago, who were instantly dressed in a beautiful belly dancing outfit and a grand sultan's robes respectively, before with a flash of light the outfits were switched, and in another flash Iago was dressed in a royal vizier's robes identical to the ones Jafar wore normally.

Jafar stared at the genie before shrugging, a wicked grin lighting up his face.

"I wish to be the most powerful sorcerer in the world! AHAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!"

Genie looked nonplussed at that as Jafar's laughs grew in intensity and volume. "You sure that's it?"

Jafar's cackling came to a halt as he glared at Genie hatefully. "YES!"

Genie shrugged. "I mean, you could wish to be an all-powerful Genie..." He summoned a glass of
tea and held it to his lips. "But that's none of my business."

Jafar blinked. "...Do I have to go around half-naked like you?"

Genie paused in his sip and looked affronted. "...You might get used to it."

Jafar stared. "Oh. VERY WELL THEN! IN THAT CASE! GENIE! MY FIRST TRUE WISH! MAKE ME! AN ALL-POWERFUL!"

Genie rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers. "Yeesh, I get it, we all know where this is going."

"...Especially you folks at home," he added with a wink.

The girl in black jumped back, startled, and fell out of her chair away from the crystal ball.

Hiding behind her chair, she watched as the blue man changed the vizier, and as Sora and the others fought the newly transformed red genie, the way sweat trailed down Sora's neck, the way the muscles of Kairi's back bunched and flexed under her top...

Flushing red, she jumped back into her chair as the door to the room opened and a woman wearing the same cloak walked in. The older blonde ignored her, and snapped her fingers, causing a number of white and gray husks to appear and start warping and interlocking their forms, until eventually they arranged themselves into a large gray sofa.

The woman jumped onto the seat and propped her feet up and read a book with what seemed to be a variety of torture implements on the cover.

The girl sighed, and reluctantly turned back to her desk, picking up her crayon once more to draw.
In the darkness of the basement, the dark grey-haired schemer looked up from his musings as a mountain of a man appeared before him in a vortex of darkness.

He waited patiently as the chestnut-headed figure stood there silently, before finally sighing in exasperation. "Don't I even get a 'hello' Lexaeus?"

An angular-faced and gaunt man with long blonde hair appeared next, irritation flashing in his eyes. "What's going on, Zexion? I demand an explanation."

Zexion sighed once again. "Nice to see you too, Vexen," he said calmly before continuing. "You know, it's deplorable..." Zexion shook his head sadly. "The Organization used to be the rope that binds us. And now it's full of kinks."

Vexen glared. "How dare you—!?"

"Let it go Vexen," Lexaeus interrupted calmly, in a tone that brooked no argument. "Tell us, Zexion, what did you detect?"

"Visitors. I picked up two scents in the castle's lowest basement. One of them was Maleficent, but —"

"Absurd," Vexen scoffed. "The witch is gone. She cannot return from the realm of darkness of her own volition—"

"—If you would let me finish." Zexion focused on Vexen with a glare before continuing. "The scent belonged not to Maleficent but a very convincing double. But I can't say much beyond that, since the would-be Maleficent is no more. Our other visitor saw to that."

"Who is it?" Lexaeus asked.

Zexion steepled the fingers of his hands together in front of himself. "I don't know..." he admitted. "But the scent was very similar to the Superior's. Exactly similar, if I may say."
"Rubbish," Vexen dismissed.

"Fact, Vexen," Zexion countered. "Now, what shall we do?"

"We wait," Lexaeus rumbled. "See what develops."

"What is it, Goofy?"

Goofy paused as they stood in the exit to the floor, his face scrunched up deep in thought. "It's that castle I mentioned earlier. I'm sure I didn't make it up. That was the castle where Sora used the Keyblade to free Kairi's heart."

Kairi gasped as she nodded. "Right! That's where I got my keyblade too, and Sora turned into a Heartless!"

Sora frowned. "That happened in a castle?"

"You forgot?" Donald sneered. "Well, I remember it perfectly."

"What was it called," Sora challenged.

"Easy! It was..." Donald held one feather up in the air, with his mouth open, for an uncomfortably long moment.

"Hey, Jiminy. You wrote down everything that happened in your journal, right?" Kairi asked, in an attempt to help Donald out.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about the Jiminy memo," Goofy said.
"Don't look at me," the girl in black mumbled, as she glanced at the crystal ball. "You forgot that all on your own."

"You know they can't hear you, right?" The woman commented from the couch.

The girl frowned, before standing up. "I need some fresh air," she announced, leaving through the doors the other woman had entered moments before.

The woman shrugged and licked the finger of her glove before turning the page.

"Only darkness can help you now." He sneered.

"You're wrong!"

"That voice...! Your Majesty, is that you?!"

"You betcha! Riku, you're not alone. Listen careful now, Riku. The light'll never give up on you. You'll always find it, even in the deepest darkness! But you have to believe!"

The man known as Ansem sighed as the corridor of darkness closed behind him. "If only it were so easy, my friend..." he muttered.

"Perhaps it can be."

He whirled around and lunged, hoping to destroy the accursed and vile Nobody that had followed him—
—Only to stop in his tracks as chains wrapped around his arm, and his entire body. He stared in shock at the familiar face, one that reminded of home, and fountains and flowers. For a moment, it seemed she had barely changed at all. But the red locks of hair framing that face turned gold.

She *(No, *IT*, he insisted to himself)* wasn't even here, he noted idly out of agitation. Just an illusion.

He yanked at the chains and winced as they dug at his flesh. An illusion that could still overpower him, it seemed. Unfortunate.

"...You should speak to them," she said, calmly.

Ansem simply glared at her in response.

"Your friends," she clarified. "Your apprentices, your children."

"I have none of those things," he said brokenly, as, rather than the voice of the Seeker of Darkness, his words came out instead as that of Darkness in Zero, as he inadvertently dropped his persona out of exhaustion.

"...You want revenge? Yes?"

He glared at her hatefully. The abomination that *dared* to wear her face. Thankfully, the force of his rage seemed to have some effect, as she flinched, and recoiled as if struck.

"What do you want, Nobody?"

The frail slip of a girl *(No, not a girl, definitely not a girl, or a child, or a person of any kind)* seemed to be affected by that reminder as well, before nodding and holding her head up high.

Chapter End Notes
Next up: Olympus Coliseum! And also Agrabah! Again!
Floor 3: It's All Greek to Me II: Greek Harder /Basement 11

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm so late on this! I've got a lot of personal stuff that's been going on, what with being a full-time teacher and also becoming a single mom. I think there's a scene in here I literally wrote while in labor. Unless I went back and deleted it in editing, that's been happening a lot too.

Also I've been wasting probably way too much time playing Kingdom Hearts Unchained X. And Final Fantasy XV.

And then 2.8 happened lmfao

...And 1.5 + 2.5 and Dark Souls and Nier: A Tomato and OKAY, I admit, I'm just a procrastinating piece of shit lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Something funny's going on..." Donald scowled. "How could everything Jiminy wrote vanish like that?"

"Maybe it's not just stuff we write down," Sora said. "Goofy said we've been to some other castle. But I don't remember it at all. None of us really do. Maybe...Maybe we don't remember because those memories are gone."

Kairi blinked. "Gone?"

Donald frowned. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Wait!" Jiminy started jumping from his place on Sora's shoulder. "Remember what that guy in the black hood said? 'In this place, to find is to lose and to lose is to find.' He was talking about memories!"

"So if we keep going, we'll lose our memories..." Sora said.

"No wonder they call it Castle Oblivion," said Kairi.
"So the higher we go, the more we forget?" Donald said. "What if we forget everything and can't get it back?"

Kairi looked Sora in the eye. "We'd forget Riku, too..."

"Maybe we should turn back..." said Donald.

"Don't worry fellahs!" They turned and looked at Goofy as he held his fist in his palm. "We might forget about where we've been or what things we've seen, but we won't forget who our friends are."

Donald looked dubious at this. "I don't know..."

Goofy looked at Sora. "C'mon, Sora, when you turned into a Heartless, did you forget about us?"

Sora looked insulted by this suggestion. "Of course not!" He grabbed Kairi's hand. "I'd never forget you!" Kairi blushed at this.

"There ya go! No matter what happens, you won't forget your friends."

Kairi nodded, and squeezed Sora's hand back before looking back at Goofy. "You're right. Thanks, Goofy," she said.

Donald nodded as if it was all his idea, and began strutting forward towards the door. "I guess there's nothing to be scared of after all. So let's go!"

Sora grinned next to her, and Kairi glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "But back when I was a Heartless, who was the one who clobbered me, hmm?"

Donald froze. "That's what you should be forgetting," he growled in a low voice.
"Permeating my bones?"

Riku laughed hollowly as he strode forward, the taste of darkness flooding his senses. "Maybe there's no turning back for me after all."

"Riku"

"Sorry, your majesty, but do you really think I'll make it?"

"Don't worry, Riku."

"But what if—"

"Don't give up on yourself!"

Riku blinked, as the king appeared before him.

"Who cares what ya smell like? Believe in yourself. And brush your teeth. Then give yourself a good scrub in the bath and you'll feel much better!"

Riku stared. The king looked a lot more... fuzzy than he had before. Almost transparent.

Mickey grinned and looked at himself in the hallway. "Sorry, I know I'm not as solid as you're used ta. I can only send a bit of my power here. But I have a request."

Riku blinked. "A request? From your majesty?"

Mickey nodded. "Fight the darkness inside you! It won't be easy, but don't forget! Even in the deepest darkness, there's always a little bit of light."

Riku blinked, and held up the Wayfinder that Kairi had given him. "Light within darkness?"
Mickey nodded. "You and me have seen it! The far-off, welcoming light inside the door to darkness. The light of Kingdom Hearts will show you the way."

"So please..." Riku brushed the tears from his eyes.

"Give me some credit your majesty! I'll be alright."

Mickey blinked, then nodded. "Alright, haha."

Riku nodded. "He's not gonna get his way."

Mickey extended his gloved hand. "Then let's make a promise. I'll get to you as soon as I can."

Riku nodded, but as his fingers brushed those of the rodent they ended up phasing right through each other.

"...Did that handshake count?"

Mickey nodded. "We shook hands in our hearts. We're connected, you and me!"

Riku nodded. "Thanks, your majesty."

As they strode up to the Coliseum gates, Donald rushed ahead towards a board covered in symbols. "Look, an announcement!"

"It's for some kind of contest," Jiminy said as he hopped up on one of Sora's spikes to get a better look. "It says here that—"
"The Goddess of Spring Survival Cup," Kairi read aloud, interrupting the cricket. "Contestants have to enter an obstacle course, fighting each other along the way."

Jiminy glared at her before continuing. "Listen to this: 'The great hero Hercules will also compete for the Cup.' It says here he's never been beaten."

Sora crossed his arms in front of his chest and grinned. "Sounds like fun. Why don't we enter too?"

Goofy shook his head. "I thought you'd say that. Whenever there's a contest, you're rarin' to join up."

"What are we waiting for?" Kairi interrupted from the front gates. "The preliminary course is up ahead! Let's get going!" She turned and ran towards the stone doors, giggling as Sora gave chase after her, Jiminy trying to hold on as Donald and Goofy followed close behind.

The quartet ran off laughing, as a dark figure with a head covered in blue flame approached the sign they'd been reading. He had his arm around a spiky-haired blonde man who seemed distinctly uncomfortable with the situation, but was unwilling to speak up.

"So I said, hey, Sephie, sweetheart, baby girl, apple of my eye, light of my life, whaddya want for your birthday, just name it, babe, and it's yours, and what does she want?" Cloud opened his mouth to speak, but Hades pressed onward anyway, ignoring him. "I'll tell ya what she wants: A big ol' sports tournament. Just one problem though; NOBODY'S SIGNED UP!" Cloud winced at the yelling in his ear, and was considering slipping away when Hades's ranting slowed and then stopped when they approached the sign.

For a moment Hades stared at the sign then started to slowly read from it aloud. "...Hercules is a model of true strength and gallantry---the perfect hero!? My baby girl's big day and he makes it all about himself!? WHY THAT LITTLE..."

Cloud watched as Hades grew more and more red, then finally shrugged off the god's arm. "That's what you hired me for, right?"

Hades whirled around to stare at him, his face a mix of rage and confusion. Cloud shrugged and nonchalantly ran his hand through his bangs. "I'll take care of Hercules in the games. Put on a good show for your kid. And you'll restore my lost memories, right?"
Hades nodded mutely, then turned back to the signboard as Cloud walked off.

Cloud heard the god of the underworld's continued muttering, then winced as an anguished, angry scream was coupled with a sudden wave of heat at his back.

Riku frowned as he stepped through the door into a very familiar room.

He looked and saw the world's keyhole at his back. In front of him, on the floor, passed out, was the princess.

...He realized, to his deep frustration, that he couldn't quite remember her name.

He knew he'd heard it. But he hadn't paid enough attention to it, clearly.

He crouched down by her shoulder, and attempted to rouse her by gently shaking her. "Get up," he murmured quietly. "Your people need you, your highness." He continued for a minute or so, before freezing when he heard a scoff behind him.

"And what precisely do you think you're going to achieve?"

Riku whirled around and glared as green flames appeared, forming first a quirked eyebrow and then the rest of Maleficent as she gazed down at him and the princess.

"Didn't I defeat you already!?" Riku summoned Soul Eater to his hand, as dark smoke swirled around his arm. Maleficent simply shook her head as a response.

"Your memory of me is not eliminated so easily. Not while you cling so tightly to the light." Maleficent said, before freezing in a mix of disgust, horror and pity, as some new idea occurred to her. "Perhaps, in your mind, I might even be one of the lights you wish to see?"
"Like I'd ever want to see you again!" Riku snarled, glaring.

Maleficent sniffed and turned away from him. "In that case, why am I here? This castle created me from YOUR memories, unless you've forgotten."

Riku glared. "I defeated you once," he said. "You shouldn't be here at all. The light should have gotten rid of you."

Maleficent snorted. "You can't defeat darkness with light. Any half-baked fairy godmother could tell you that."

Riku glared, then turned and started trying to shake the princess awake again. Her head lolled awkwardly from side to side, and he winced and gently eased her back down to the ground.

"Aren't you going to do something about that?" Maleficent said derisively.

Riku looked at where she was indicating, and glanced at the large red form of Jafar in the lava pit down below, Sora, Donald, and a dark-skinned young man in a purple vest frozen in place glaring with weapons drawn at Jafar's annoying pet parrot. Riku glanced at Maleficent out of the corner of his eye. "Will he stay down after I beat him, or stick around to haunt me like an annoying creditor like you?"

Maleficent simply smirked. "You'll find that memories of him are not nearly as persistent as I am."

Riku shrugged, before jumping into the hole in the earth. "Good enough for me."

In the darkness of the basment, Zexion opened his eyes. "The Maleficent scent has reappeared."

Vexen paused in his pacing and glared at the younger man incredulously, while Lexaeus thoughtfully chewed on the pickled radishes Zexion had prepared earlier. "Stop wasting our time," Vexen scoffed. "I thought we established that Maleficent was a double. Stop wasting our time and figure out the identity of the other intruder!"
Zexion looked up at Vexen, the withering glint in his eye leaving the other man speechless. "...I would not interrupt me again, Vexen. And while you are correct, there's something about this Maleficent that seems different. Slightly more corporeal, more real, and growing more so all the time, albeit slowly. Tell me, are you aware that some sorcerers have sought to attain immortality through the memories of others?"

Vexen put his hand on his chin. "You are proposing that Maleficent is using the properties of Castle Oblivion to return to the realm of the living?"

Zexion shrugged expansively. "I am proposing nothing as of yet. Merely observing that something seems unusual about this memory double, and its connection to the other intruder to whom it is linked: Riku."

Vexen nodded thoughtfully. "Ah, I see. His existence was once doubled in the darkness."

Zexion pouted slightly, annoyed at the fact that Vexen had said what he had been about to. Lexaeus looked between the two other men and swallowed before speaking. "That must be why you mistook him for the Superior," he supplied. "Because, in a sense, he is."

"The dark power given to Riku facilitated his escape from its realm," Vexen hypothesized. "One with ties to both the Keyblade and the powers of darkness? This merits further research."

Zexion brought his hand to his mouth. "What I want to know is, why he appeared here in Castle Oblivion," he wondered.

Vexen gestured dismissively. "Ha! That's simple. His existence resonates with those of other heroes. Sora and Kairi came, so Riku followed."

Zexion paused in his train of thought as it was forcibly derailed, and he and Lexaeus lowered their arms to their sides. "Sora and Kairi are in the Castle?" Zexion repeated.

"Yes," said Vexen. "They and their companions arrived earlier. By now that dog Marluxia is already using Number XV to meddle with their hearts."
"What a foolish plan," Vexen scoffed. "Their is not such an interesting existence. The entity that holds true value is clearly Riku, the hero of darkness."

"Don't be so sure," Lexaeus interrupted. "None of us suspected one of the Seven might be chosen, not even the Superior. That one so pure can also wield the keyblade is worth investigation."

Kairi ran through the doors as fireballs and nuts flew past, hurriedly pulling it shut as her friends ran in past her. She slumped against it with a sigh as Donald and Goofy panted, while Sora healed everyone with a few cure spells.

"Where'd you guys come from? You finish the prelims?"

They looked behind Sora and saw a goat-man was already in the small lobby, scrutinizing them. Sora grinned and nodded. The satyr rolled his eyes.

"Well, ya made it alright, but you might as well head back if you're interested in winning. You're never going to beat Herc."

Kairi frowned. "Why not?"

"Yeah, come on Phil, they cleared the prelims. I think they deserve a shot."

A muscular man in a bronze chest plate strode in, as Phil sighed. "But Herc—"

Hercules grinned cheekily. "Of course, we could always cancel the games."

"Um, no??"
They looked and suddenly in a mix of vines, pollen and a faint hint of frost and smoke there was a glowing young woman in the room with them, with a crown like flower petals around her face. Phil leered for a moment and then winced when she turned her gaze at him.

"I wanted the main event of my personal festival to be a physical contest because I need strapping young mortals to do all the vigorous plowing and sowing and seeding of the fields for Spring-time." The goddess bent down and grabbed the goat-man by the horns, before lifting him up to her eye-level. "I approached YOU, Philoctetes, because of your skill with training heroes, and organizing competitions such as this, famed throughout Greece and among all the Gods of Olympus."

"And I just want to thank you again Miss Persephone, I'm so glad you picked me for— URK!"

Hercules grabbed Phil by the mouth and gently pulled him away from Persephone, who readily relinquished the trainer of heroes to her cousin. "Old Phil's prelim course was so hard, no one else could finish it," he explained with a shrug.

Sora stepped between the goddess and Phil, raising his hands up placatingly. "Let us compete, and you won't have to cancel the games! How about it, Phil?"

Phil glanced between the boy, the goddess standing behind him with a coldly murderous look in her eyes, and the boy's friends standing by the entrance. "You've got me over a barrel," he admitted, "so fine. Since your team and Hercules are the only contenders—"

"They're not."

They looked, and saw a young man stride in slowly, his hair blonde and spiky, a tattered red scarf around his neck and shoulders. The man brushed his bangs out of his face with one hand. "The games have a new challenger. Name's Cloud."

Persephone nodded and left through the front gates. "Good. Perhaps now it will be worth watching."

Phil glanced nervously at the departing goddess, before casting his gaze on all the contestants. "Everybody line up! I've gotta explain the rules. Rule #1: First one through the obstacle course wins! Rule #2! In the event of a tie, a battle will determine the winner! Rule #3! You can interfere with your opponents on the course! And finally...Rule #4! All challengers have to give it
Kairi got into a stance, keeping her balance light on her feet.

"All right, enough with the spiel." Phil opened the doors to the course, and raised his arm in the air. "On your marks... Get set... GO!!"

The competitors all raced forward, Kairi giggling all the while.

Riku grinned cheekily at the bird as it flew away from him. "You're finished!" he announced, before jumping forward and stabbing through the lamp in the parrot's talons.

The red genie howled in pain before vanishing in blackness, as the darkness engulfed him.

Riku dismissed his weapon, and looked around, slowly realizing there was nowhere for him to go. He glanced at the lava below the platform, glowing brightly (invitingly) but seemingly radiating no heat. He took a breath, and dove forward, bracing himself for the heat, for the burning. It never came. Instead the lava disappeared around him like mist, leaving him standing in the white hallway, the door at his back. He looked around in confusion for a moment, before stepping forward. He ran up the stairs to the next door, and held a card aloft, not bothering with checking which one.

It's not like his memories could bring him something worse than what actually happened the first time.

Sora ran panting through the gates to see Cloud on one knee, Hercules standing over him with arms crossed. "You lost," Hercules announced, "Give it up, Cloud!"

Donald frowned and glanced at Goofy. "How did Cloud beat us here again?"
Goofy scratched his head and shrugged. Kairi pursed her lips, and crossed her arms in front of her chest as she bowed her head in thought. "I mean, we beat him earlier," she noted, "And he ran in the other direction..."

They were interrupted by Sora, running forward and standing between Hercules and Cloud. "Don't worry, I'll back you up!"

Cloud rolled his shoulders. "Get all the backup you want. I'm going to finish you and get back my memories!"

Kairi frowned, and stepped forward, her keyblade lowered disarmingly. "Your memories?" she asked.

"...Yeah, seriously, what're you talking about kid?"

Kairi jumped as Hades appeared in a cloud of smoke, accompanied by the smell of brimstone.

Cloud looked up in shock. "We had a deal!"

Hades frowned. "...Sorry, have we met before? Can't remember. Must not have been too important to me. Probably wasn't paying attention. Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, Rule #5: it's never too late to enter the games."

Cloud stared, his jaw hanging open. "But... my lost memories!"

Hades snorted. "Stay like that and you'll catch flies, kid. If you can't remember something, it's probably because you don't care about it too much either. What I do care about though, is making sure Irkules here gets his complementary one-way ticket to the Underworld."

Sora ran forward, keyblade at the ready, to stand between Hades and Hercules. Hades scoffed. "Oh, so you kiddies wanna go with him?"

Kairi shook her head, raising her own keyblade to the ready. "No, we just want you to go home, Hades!"
Hades shrugged, "Same thing. Rule #6: There are no rules!"

Kairi yelled and ran forward, only to stop when Hades lazily pointed a finger at her and a sudden wave of heat and pain erupted between her eyebrows.

"KAIRI!"

Closing her eyes, and taking a moment to suck in a breath through her clenched teeth, she summoned the keyblade of heart, feeling the way it hummed in her hand, feeling warm like a hand (or six) grasping her own, comforting like a hug, soft like a kiss. With a yell, she spun around and threw it, covered in ice magic, her heart singing when she heard that smarmy, sleazy voice cry out in pain. She summoned Destiny's Embrace immediately, coated it in the same freezing power and let it fly towards where she heard the voice before, smirking when she heard it strike true.

"This. Isn't. Happening!" Hades ground out, and Sora ran forward and slapped his keyblade across the god's brow.

The Lord of the Underworld swayed on his feet and fell forward, sending up enough dust from the arena grounds to douse his hair, leaving him unconscious and covered in sand and dirt.

Riku frowned as he took in the odd colors and pulsating flesh inside Monstro. As he tried to get his bearings, he heard a sound and as he began to turn himself towards it, he flinched. There, in the same bowtie and lederhosen as last time was the wooden puppet Pinocchio, looking around the wet walls and somehow not noticing Riku.

As Riku stood still, hoping the other person wouldn't notice he was there, he felt those hopes dashed when he heard a feminine voice beside him call out.

"Are you lost, child?"

The puppet whirled to look in the direction of the voice, then froze when he saw Riku, his eyes
widening before he turned and ran back the way he came, screaming in a panic.

Riku looked at the tunnel to the right where the wooden boy went, and decided to keep going forward, ignoring the smirks Maleficent was directing towards his back.

He stopped, however, when he heard the boy puppet's shriek.

"HELP! SOMEBODY! HEEEEEEELLLLLP!"

He turned around and glared at Maleficent, and when she only arched an eyebrow in response he snarled and charged at her, Soul Eater cutting through where she had been as she dispersed into cackling green flames.

Riku ignored her howls of laughter as he kept running towards the panicked yells.

"C'mon, are you sure there aren't any girls you like to look at?"

"Besides you?" Sora started, before blushing as if he only just realized what he said the moment it came out of his mouth.

Kairi snapped her head towards him before immediately looking away as heat and embarrassment crept up her own face.

"I hope the King's doing okay," Donald said, cutting through the teen awkwardness.

"What d'ya mean by that?" Jiminy prompts, hoping to continue this line of conversation.

Donald grinned, and shrugged. "I just wanted to be sure I hadn't forgotten him," he said.

How'd that go for you? asked a white jumpsuit which paused as it swam through the air, its head
tilted to the side in a show of curiosity.

"I still remember perfectly! Goofy and I are on a quest to find him," Donald said, oblivious to the gawking stares his companions gave to the strange interloper.

The creature in question seemed to have had its curiosity satisfied, and continued its way down the hallway, at the end of which it acquired a bucket and mop from behind a pedestal and proceeded to begin cleaning, wrapping its sharp pointed arms around the handle.

Kairi tilted her head to the side and stared at the creature with the others, as Donald continued walking obliviously. For whatever reason, her attention returned to the conversation as she brought her hand up to finger the necklace around her neck. "I guess there's no way we'll forget the most important memories," she murmured.

"I hope not..." Donald agreed, before he suddenly stopped and turned around and stared.

"WHAT THE HECK IS THAT THING!?"

In another of the white rooms in the castle, two figures in black were gazing at a crystal ball depicting Sora and his friends, the one standing with vibrant and spiked red hair, and the other, a blonde with her hair slicked back was lounging on a couch with a book titled *The Complete works of the Marquis De Sade* open on her lap.

...Or, rather, the redhead was gazing. The blonde didn't seem to have looked up from her book. "You're so careful playing with them, Axel," she commented idly. "I would have kicked them around some more."

Axel snorted. "Yeah, well, I have healthier hobbies than you, Larxene."

"How can you say that?" Larxene grinned at him wickedly. "I mean, you're always disappearing after missions with a couple of kids. You know how that looks, right?"

Axel turned to glare at her, then shrugged. Perhaps out of disappointment at his failure to rise to...
the bait, Larxene pressed on. "You seem pretty taken by these kids too. But not their keyblades," Larxene mused, pressing her chin onto her fist. "You're interested in their hearts, aren't you?"

"He became a Heartless, Larxene," he said flatly. "And we of all people should know what happens to people who do."

"People who lose their hearts also lose their minds, their feelings," she recited. "They're consumed by the darkness. It takes total control."

"But not Sora," Axel said. "He held on to his feelings, even as a Heartless. Only one other man ever managed that."

"And the girl?"

"She restored him, completely," Axel said as he shook his head. "That's never happened before. She is, literally, the key. I want to find out what it is that sleeps deep inside her heart."

"So it's the strength of their hearts that intrigues you," Larxene realized. "The hearts chosen by the Keyblade."

Axel shrugged. "Unlocking the secrets of the Heart is the whole reason we, the Organization, exist. Right?"

Chapter End Notes

Out of curiosity, does anyone know of any up-tempo battle remixes of Naminé's theme?

Like, an orchestrated song that would be Naminé's equivalent to The Other Promise or Vector To The Heavens. As compared to Roxas and Xion's usual musical themes.

Probably going to need that at some point. Before this fic is done, even.

I like Hades he's my favorite Disney character to write. It's sad that I won't be writing him for a bit. Maybe I can shove him into Days somewhere. The only problem is that as much as Hades is a fun character to write, Phil very much is not. At all.

And, like. Even if Hades is fun I can't really do much with him right now.
I like Maleficent too.

So next we've got Wonderland and Monstro and Neverland! And a boss! With very cold shoulders! Someone get him a sweater.

I'm also working on a First Breath concert fic for this AU so. Watch out for that.
Floor 4 /Basement 9.5

Chapter Summary

In which Alice is a Keyblade Master, and Naminé and Riku kinkshame themselves.

Chapter Notes

So, hey, I wrote a [one-shot in this AU](#) check it out maybe. It basically has Naminé getting high on Xehanort and having a really bad trip.

For some reason I think a lot about Alice in KH, and not just because I'm a nerd for classic literature and classic animation (and I am) but. It's weird to me how Alice is a Princess of Heart when one of her defining character traits is curiosity and inquisitiveness, which in the context of KH are most commonly associated with Riku and the Xehanorts and Ansems. That feels like something that would or could be interesting to explore, thematically and metaphysically, especially when, in the same game, Ariel is essentially damned for her own pursuit of the world around her the same way Riku is. But Alice chases around rabbits and cats and mad unbirthday parties and falls down a hole and it's fine I guess?

Also both the stories by Carroll and the Disney movie (the original animated one, anyway) are somewhat explicit about how Alice imagined Wonderland in her own head, so the fact that we go there is weird too, but also fits with the thing where the worlds were all destroyed and then remade by children, which Alice is.

also is it possible to give AO3 fics covers because [this is canon](#) credit to kingdomsaurushearts

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Riku raced into another squishy chamber, his teeth gritted and shoulders hunched. A large and rotund Heartless appeared in his path and he cut through it without sparing it a second glance. "Where is that thing, I don't have time for games," he growled.

"What's wrong, Riku? I thought you liked games!"

Riku's jaw worked.

"Or are you too cool to play them, now that you've got the dark-"
Riku spun around on his heel and lunged with a snarl, his eyes widening in shock as, instead of brown, a crown of red hair topped the head of the smirking face that Soul Eater's blade cut through.

His breath caught in his throat and he choked back tears as he spun around and swung his fist into the nearest wall, his hand sinking harmlessly into the pulsating, rubbery purple flesh.

(All the while, he struggled to ignore the faint feeling that someone was laughing at him, and that someone might just be himself.)

Donald padded forward, his brow creased with worry. "So except for our friends, we're forgetting everything bit by bit..."

"Hmm... I wonder what we just forgot," Goofy wondered aloud, prompting Kairi to come to a stop and close her eyes.

She went through a mental inventory, trying to go through everything she could remember to see if she had forgotten something.

*But wait,* she thought to herself, *if I had forgotten something, how would I know?*

"I can't think of anything. Guess I musta forgot it..." Goofy said, "But whatever it was, it must not have been that important, a-hyuck!"

*What's important?* Kairi repeated to herself, and tried to filter through her thoughts of who was important to her; there were her boys, of course, Sora's smile and Riku's curiosity and drive and passion (and obsession and darkness and danger and-)

-Ah, but, then again, part of her whispered, *doesn't danger have a certain thrill to it?*

She just shook her head at her thoughts, repressing the unbidden shiver, and pressed onward.)
She thinks of her mom, all warmth and hugs and encouragement, of being not just told, but shown how to stick up for herself, and not to worry about what anyone who won't stick up for her thinks, of always doing what she can to take care of their community on the islands, how to keep things organized and balancing the budget and coordinating storm responses and festivals and committees.

She thinks of the woman in her dreams, just recently remembered; of her strength and muscles and curves, how, as little as she was at the time, she already thought she was the prettiest person she'd ever seen, and now that she was older a heat rushed to her cheeks and her chest and pooled in her belly as she imagined that soft blue hair buried between her—

(Wait, blue? Wasn't it blonde—?)

"—KAIRI!"

Kairi jumped as she felt a tugging inside her ear and her head jerked to the side to see Jiminy, a disapproving look on his face, with the handle of his umbrella hooked through her ear piercing what—

(Kinda rude for a conscience, noted a voice that sounded suspiciously like Riku, prompting her to repress a snort.)

"You alright?" Sora asked, causing her to turn towards him. He was as flushed as she was, and a small part of her flushed even more at that, only to stop in its tracks at the blank, unfocused look in his eyes.

She could make as much fun as she wanted about Sora's attention span, but when he looked at her, he always looked at her, not like he was looking past her and, however briefly, seeing someone else.

"Are you?" she asked in turn, and was gratified when he shook his head and seemed to return to normal.

"We better keep goin'," Goofy pressed, and the others nodded in agreement. Sora raised a card to the door, and they all stepped through.
"GET ME OUTTA HERE!"

"I'm trying!" Riku shouted.

"IT'S SCARY IN HERE!"

"Sorry," Riku said with a wince, trying to be sympathetic to the plight of the wooden child he was really supposed to be apologizing to and redeeming himself towards as he dodged around a tentacle to deliver another blow.

This fight only started a little over a minute ago and it was already getting on the teen boy's nerves.

"HEEEEEEEEELP!"

"I'm trying," called Riku, as he climbed up the creature's back and somersaulted forward to deliver an axe kick to the top head. "I just need you to-!"

"GET ME OUTTA HERE!"

"I AM DAMMIT!" Riku finally snapped and, with a snarl, lunged forward slashing through the prison bar-like jaws of the bottom head, coming to a stop behind where the monstrosity had been, as he heard it dissipate and release its heart, feeling the darkness of its form dissipate and disperse and wash over him like a calming, cradling mist.

He turned around, ready to make a joke to Sora, but his words froze in his throat.

Pinnochio stared up at him, with fear in his eyes, which was more than understandable given the mangled mess of torn fabric and splintered wooden crossbeams separating his upper body from his bottom.

Riku felt like he was going to gag as he watched the legs, bent awkwardly and seemingly broken and snapped in a fall, as they twitched once in an attempt to stand. He looked up into a pair of
bright blue eyes as the wooden boy grasped at the floor desperately with his arms trying to pull himself away from Riku. "Father! Blue Fairy! Jiminy! Somebody, ANYBODY!"

As Riku watched, Maleficent strode forward behind the little puppet boy, who seemingly didn't notice even as she placed her staff against his back as he continued to pull himself away, forcing Pinnochio to sit upright while he came to a stop and continued to stare at Riku.

"What were you expecting?" Maleficent asked. "That you could redeem yourself in his eyes?"

Her finger was extended towards the puppet, and as Riku watched, frozen in place, a single green flame appeared and hovered at the end of her black fingernail, before expanding and seemingly sucking all the air out of the room.

Riku stood there, and as he watched the walls of the whale's belly burn around him, and Maleficent threw her head back in peals of endless laughter, he realized something. He remembered the feasts after a whale washed up on shore, the bonfires, and the smell of burning blubber and wood.

That smell was nowhere to be found in the green inferno.

"It's not real," Riku said.

Maleficent's cackling petered out, and she looked at him with disappointment. "Come again?"

"None of this was real!" Riku challenged, the seashell charm gripped tightly in his hand. "I can still make it up to the real Pinnochio some day."

Maleficent just tsked at him. "This castle has no power but to show you the contents of your heart; both your memories and the feelings those memories invoke."

"What are you saying!" Riku snapped.

Maleficent's face softened into one of pity. "That what you saw is nothing more or less than what you believe in your heart. If you truly believed you could ever save that pathetic puppet, your heart would not have compelled the wretched thing to jump in front of your blade."
Riku stood stock still for the longest time, his head bowed and staring at the floor. A single drop of fluid rolled down his nose and splashed against the charred ground.

Maleficent said nothing, but her lips pursed, and a look of discomfort passed across her face. "What are you-"

In an instant, Riku surged forward, taking the witch by surprise as he buried his face in her sternum, knocking her ungracefully to the floor and sending her staff flying across the room. She braced herself for the end of this instance of herself, but it never came, leaving her with a sobbing human teenager pressed to her breast. She raised her hand for an instant, unsure what to do to rectify this unfortunate situation, as the physical strength of her body had never been a strong suit, before finally, she resigned herself to placing the talons of her hand on the back of the boy's head and neck, rubbing up and down in an attempt to soothe.

It was strikingly similar to the last time that they had been in this position, not so long ago when this same boy had arrived on her doorstep, and just as before Maleficent resolved to never speak of this moment again, even as she murmured soft hymns in the tongue of the faeries under her breath into the boy's scalp.

And, just as before, she cursed Xehanort and Ansem for putting her in this position, forcing her to do all the work while reaping none of the benefit.

Well, things would be different this time, she swore. With every moment, and especially as Riku's attachment grew, she felt herself growing stronger by leaps and bounds, and would soon be no longer condemned to the bleak abyss her former "partner" had consigned her to.

And after that-!

Well.

After that would have to come later, she thought, as the body pressing her to the ground slackened and the breathing evened into sleep and her already limited physical form and the room around them disappeared without the focus of memory to sustain them, forcing her to bide her time to return later.
"Gawrsh, looks like some kind of get-together. What's the occasion?"

"KAIRI!"

Kairi let out a guttural 'whoof' of air as an extremely energetic blonde head crashed into her chest.

"Step away from the defendant!" the White Rabbit cried, as card soldiers approached the girls with weapons raised.

"I've done nothing wrong!" said Alice, glaring at the Queen of Hearts.

"Uh, Alice, is that really you?" Donald asked hesitantly, prompting the girl to glance at him, and respond with a "Hallo Dolan," making the wizard fume silently and regret he had even asked.

"Feigning ignorance, dear?" The Queen waved her fan dismissively, not noticing or not caring about the intruders to her court. "You are charged with aiding the creatures called Heartless who threaten my domain!"

"Fiddlesticks! Where's the evidence?" Alice demanded, while pressing more firmly against Kairi's torso, her back to Kairi's front, leaving Kairi feeling like an extremely confused backpack or blanket.

"The evidence is..."

There was a long pause, during which the cards shuffled awkwardly and the White Rabbit even risked a glance at his pocketwatch while maintaining his peripheral vision on his Queen, who simply stared ahead blinking dumbly while opening and closing her mouth.

"The evidence is I forgot!" The Queen of Hearts suddenly spat, causing all in attendance to jump. "That's the evidence! Because you, Alice, are the one who stole my memory!"

"We can't rid the kingdom of Heartless until we get Her Majesty's memory back. This is a serious
"Crime!" the White Rabbit added.

"I'm the thief!" Kairi shouted, pulling Alice behind her and holding one of her keyblades in each hand.

The Queen seemed to be about to retort, but Kairi failed to notice because of two happenings which seemed to occur simultaneously. The first was that, when she tried to cover Alice with her own body, the younger girl wasn't there.

Secondly, she noticed a reassuring weight she had grown used to in her hand or her heart had vanished, most likely caused by the fact that Alice was charging forward with- *is that the keyblade of heart?*

"Yaaaaaaaargh!" Alice cried as she charged forward, causing the Queen's eyes to widen in panic instead of her usual boisterousness.

"Cards! Protect your Queen!" she shouted, and in response Alice swung through a cluster of heart soldiers, causing Kairi to feel the most bizarre sensation, like she was lightheaded only in her chest instead of her skull, or like someone had reached inside her chest, grabbed her behind her sternum, and started swinging her around by that hold.

*Is this what the others have been feeling while I've been using that awful thing?* Kairi wondered dazedly to herself, standing in place as the others rushed on ahead to drag young Alice out of the fracas and to safety or hiding somewhere. *How can they stand it,* she started to wonder, before Alice, picked up over Donald's shoulder (who was in turn picked up over Sora's shoulder, who was being carried over Goofy's shoulder) glanced at her handiwork of a neatly folded suite of playing-card men with a satisfied look before adjusting her grip on the handle, and brushing off dust off the shaft of the blade.

Instantly, Kairi was reminded of the times Sora or Riku had rubbed her lower back deeply during cramps, or when she and the boys had all just sat around and massaged each others' feet after a long day at school when the dress uniform shoes had been particularly uncomfortable; an intimate and reassuring physical sensation, only instead of her back muscles or her feet it was centered inside of her chest.

She almost didn't notice when Goofy, in a hurry and not looking where he was going, bowled into her, forcing her to carry him as he held onto his own passengers with Alice's skirts blowing into her face and blocking her vision while the girl's feet kicked wildly in front of her and nearly catching her in the eyes nose or mouth.
Even with this impediment, however, she kept going, running through where she thought the heart-shaped gate in the hedge was, hoping it would bring her and her companions back to (relative) safety in the forest.

"Riku, I presume?"

Riku flushed and tried to wipe any remaining tears from his eyes, hoping against hope that they weren't too red around the rim. "Are you with Ansem?" He snarled.

"You are half correct," the blonde man murmured. "Let us say that it's not the Ansem you know. He is Ansem and He is not — which is to say that He is nobody at all!"

Riku rolled his eyes. "Nobody, huh? Sorry, riddles aren't my thing. I'm getting enough of that from Maleficent. Try again."

The man scowled at this, his eyebrow suddenly spasming and twitching. "Maleficent isn't here! She's dead, and gone, claimed by the darkness; and never to be seen again!"

Riku raised his eyebrow at the outburst. "You seem pretty upset over Maleficent," he noted. "What, are you her -ex or something?"

A familiar voice sneered and made a noise of disgust where only Riku could hear it.

The man smirked, calmed from his earlier frenetic energy. "The man I stand with belongs to neither the light nor the dark, but walks the twilight between. As do I. And for that matter —" he seemed to perk up as Riku suddenly stiffened at that before adding; "Ha ha, that's right. We have much in common."

"Maybe we do..." Riku admitted softly. "But so what! Is that an invitation to join your club? Yeah, there's darkness inside me, just like you said. But darkness is my enemy! And so are you for reeking of that awful smell!"
The strange man in the black cloak grinned widely, as snowflakes coalesced in front of him in the form of a shield. "Oh ho, so it's a fight you want. Very well — a fight you shall get!"

"We can ask Axel when he and Naminé get back! Then all four of us can have ice cream together!"

"Okay!" Xion replied with a smile and Naminé froze in the dream because of how beautiful that smile was.

The two teens sat on the clock tower a little longer and Naminé watched them, longing to be there in that perfect moment with her twin Nobody and that beautiful doll's beautiful new face.

The moment didn't last, as moments never do, and the pair of Nobody and his Replica returned to the castle, met by the unapproving gaze of Saïx. Naminé frowned at the sneering curl to his lip and how strange it was, as something niggled at the frayed edges of her perception. He had never been nice, of course not, but always seemed to respect effort and successful mission completion.

So how could he look at Naminé's friends like a foul creature and something it had left on the floor, right after a long day collecting hearts?

How could he look at that beautiful face and be anything other than enraptured?

(He can't see her face just like you couldn't at first, A traitorous thought whispered.)

(No, another, even more traitorous thought replied, you thought she was beautiful when she didn't even have a face.)

Snapping back to the dream, she realized that somehow the pair had made their way to the showers and were casually undressing around each other.

Sora and Kairi's memories were filled with sleepovers and hot springs and baths that, at first, had been deemed cute by everyone's parents but slowly were met with slightly more suspicion and unease as the trio filled out and grew into the changes of puberty (some changes Naminé was grateful she might never have to face as she thought back to a week ago, when every cramp through Kairi's midsection echoed and stung where Naminé's own womb would be) but despite the worries the three friends treated each other almost the same as they always had.
(This was not, as Naminé was increasingly aware of as she sought to rewrite their memories and feelings, because the stereotypical feelings between blooming teenagers were absent. Riku in particular had alternated between either being unable to talk to Kairi at all unless he forgot she was a girl, and eyeing her with that same hungry possessiveness he had started to have towards everything else he thought would get him the "outside world" he craved.)

(The worst part, of course, was that Kairi had noticed. And for all that she loved Riku and had thought about him constantly, she was increasingly aware of the way he thought of her as a Thing and not a person, or a friend, much less an Equal.)

(Kairi blamed herself for this, Naminé knew, for not being the one to reach out, to "fix" Riku's darkness, as in the stories and fairy tales where the light of a Beauty could fix a Beast.)

(Marluxia always waxed on about fairy tales, and at times seemed to have stepped out of one himself, but Larxene, through all her cruelties, had taught Naminé very well what she thought about the way "princesses" were "supposed to be" in stories.)

(The islands weren't like Marluxia's Age of Fairy Tales, or the world that had produced the broken girl that had become Larxene out of spite. There was no one Kairi could have turned to for help or advice. Boys and girls were trusted to play together by themselves, and no other boys ever looked at girls in the dark, possessive, aggressive way Riku had looked at Kairi.)

(Or, some thread in Kairi’s-or-Naminé’s subconscious pointed out, the way Ansem had once looked at Kairi, in Hollow Bastion, Before.)

(Or, another thread hinted, the way Ansem must have looked at Riku.)

Naminé winced, feeling distantly but trying to ignore as she stayed in the sweetness of sleep the way the facial movement stretched her skin across the edges of her desk, the way her crayons and pencils dug their edges into her cheek.

(How am I any different, aren’t I just using her as well)

(You aren't her friend)

(She dug into the memories of island life again, turning this time through the vast distances
between worlds, to the parents, what raising these heroic children of light was like, envying despite herself how it would feel to be a normal girl with someone, anyone, that cared for her or watched over her.)

(She was struck, as always, by how idyllic Island life was. How children could walk home safely and unconcerned from school, how teenagers could go off to an island by themselves without any adult supervision.)

(How a girl and her two boys thought they could leave their parents behind and travel to a different world entirely, by raft of all things, without anyone stopping them because none of their friends and family knew)

She was distracted as she became aware again of the happenings in the dream, as Roxas lathered soap in the small of Xion's back, in a spot the other girl couldn't reach on her own—

Naminé jerked herself upward into wakefulness, severing the connection as violently as she could, and turned her attention sharply away from it, as a result not even noticing the way her usage of power crashed against Roxas's already fragile mind, memories and body, causing him to collapse helplessly against Xion's back in a deep unconsciousness.

Why am I like this, Naminé asked herself.

"Like what," asked a low baritone in her ear, informing her she had spoken aloud, and barely giving her enough warning to suck in a breath and lean back in her chair as the dull side of a blade was pressed flat against her stomach and pulled her against the torso of another, forcing her to stand as the blade's inward-facing curved edge pulled upward so it was only an inch away from nicking her chest.

"...Weak," the girl replied, the word fading into the air the moment she said it.

The voice in her ear rumbled and purred through the chest at her back, before finally it dripped like honey when it said "You're not weak, Naminé. You're kind."

Kairi tripped on a root, and somehow, despite his being on or near the top of the stack of bodies, she landed on top of Donald, with everyone else piled on top of her. As she pushed herself up, she
found herself accidentally putting all her weight on him, pressed against his stomach.

"Um, Donald? Are you alri-

"I'm fine!" Donald snapped, his face red and twisted in an expression of. Embarrassment? Discomfort? Disappointment? Worry? "Just leave me alone Della!"

Kairi frowned, as the color drained from Donald's face, before suddenly he shot up, knocking everyone off of him before he began stamping off.

"Don't you worry about him," Goofy explained comfortably as he glanced worriedly after Donald. "He just gets broody sometimes."

Kairi frowned, and was about to respond, before Goofy hurriedly corrected himself by saying "Moody, I meant."

"...Who's Della?"

Goofy's look turned pained, and seemed about to respond before suddenly Alice shot up and yelled "Why did you have to stop me!"

Sora frowned and whispered loudly to Kairi, "So, just to check, you're not the thief, right?"

Alice turned red, and she smacked him in the shin with her keyblade, and then when he pulled that foot to his chest she stomped her heel on his other one, causing him to yelp and fall to the ground.

"~Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimbel in the wabe~"

Everyone looked around to find the source of the bizarre and offkey singing-

"Offkey? How rude," murmured a large row of smiling teeth sitting atop Sora's chest.
"Oh, look! It's the Cheshire Cat," said Alice.

The rest of the mysterious cat slowly appeared, stripes first, as it continuously pressed its snout into Sora's chest. "That's strange," it muttered to itself. "I could have sworn there used to be more of you in there."

Kairi stepped forward and grabbed the strange animal by the back of the neck, and from the look on its face she's not sure whether she or the Cheshire Cat was more surprised by the fact that it stayed grabbed instead of disappearing. "...Oh. There you are," the cat said lamely, before perking up and looking between Kairi and Alice, who stepped forward to stand beside Kairi's elbow. "Oh, I see, so now it's you and Alice that have doubled. That must be why..."

"Doubled?" asked Alice.

"Why what?" Kairi asked.

The cat grinned sheepishly, and seemed to try scratch itself with a hind paw, but suddenly became alarmed when the limb only kicked backwards and then dangled haplessly. The cat's expressions moved from horror to a hateful glare at the two girls before smoothing into passivity. "First things first, perhaps," it said hopefully.

Kairi only raised the cat higher in the air so it was closer to eye level, in the hopes of giving it a better look at her unimpressed expression.

The cat seemed to wince, before smiling widely again. "The queen's a stickler for justice! She won't forget you till she remembers! She won't stop hounding you till you get her memory back! Did she forget because she remembers? Does she remember that she forgot? Doesn't matter, I suppose."

Sora finally sat up, with a frown on his face. "I think we oughta just stay away from her."

"That's all well and good for us, Sora," said Jiminy reproachfully. "But what about Alice? If the queen catches her again, it's off with — well, you know."

"Not if I get to her first!" Alice said, waving her key around, making Kairi feel like she was being pulled around on strings, dropping the cat in the process of her disorientation. "Why, she's queen of
nothing but a pack of cards anyway."

"She may be queen of nothing," the cat allowed from its position reclining in the air where Kairi had dropped it. "But you may well be Queen of everything."

"If you can't remember something, it's like it never happened. Likewise, if something never happened, you can't remember it. Try too hard to remember, and your memory might lie to you," the cat added, a strange twinkle in its eyes.

Riku stepped past the body kneeling on the floor, briefly considering whether to kick it in the side or whether that would just be too pathetic.

"Ha... This battle has made it clear."

'Battle'? I only hit him once, Riku thought, both irked and impressed, oddly, that the pathetic, slow, weak creature was still breathing. "Sorry, but I've literally fought off stiff breezes that were more trouble than you." And my family's rich, he added internally. Sora's the one that's been on a fishing boat during a hurricane.

The body rose from the floor in a manner that, Riku had to admit, was vaguely unsettling, like the human-looking man was actually some sort of snake or other boneless creature. "The darkness coursing through you is a tremendous power. All you needed was the right provocation."

Riku sighed, and put his hand to his brow, to block his view from the second-hand embarrassment, and said "Oh, no, a trick all along, what a bummer," tonelessly and without any inflection.

He turned on his heel, showing the strange and harmless interloper his back, almost embarrassed to continue and pressed up the stairs to show the door a card.

As he stepped through, he was prepared to go from the stark halls of the castle to some other world.
He wasn't prepared to find himself staring down a shadowy version of himself, one which looked away from him to where Sora stood over Kairi's unconscious form on the bed of the captain's cabin, trying futilely to shake her awake.

The shadow grabbed Sora, so Riku jumped forward and passed through his own shadowy doppelgänger only to find himself in its place, leaning over Sora, his mouth on the other boy's, biting and possessive, pushing Sora down onto the bed next to Kairi, leaning over the two of them and he grabbed Sora's hand and placed it on Kairi's chest and squeezed. He pulled away and looked into Sora's face to see how he liked the feel of her, only to see Kairi's indigo eyes where Sora's should be, sharp, angry, hurt and accusing.

Riku came back to himself on the other side of the room, and reached to feel his heart racing as his stomach churned.

He remembered that dream. Right after Monstro, as he lay down to sleep after claiming Hook's ship as his own, he imagined how he could convince Sora to see things his way.

("Just think about it Sora," Riku's dream had insisted. "When Kairi wakes up, she'll be so grateful to us that she'll let us do whatever we want, whenever we want!")

(He already felt uncomfortable at the dreams at the time, and found himself unable to look at Kairi's unconscious body without some degree of shame, but the knowledge that Kairi's heart, her being had been with Sora's all along...)

He was dazed out of his thoughts by a noise of something along the floor, and looked up to see a shadowy version of Kairi now, sitting in the captain's chair while Sora was held down by the shadowy Riku. The real Riku approached more cautiously this time, but the moment his hand landed on his shadowy counterpart it was like he was sucked into it, seeing through its eyes as it held Sora to the ground, dragging him over to kneel at Kairi's feet as the tightness in his waders pressed into Sora's back-

He snapped himself out of the vision more forcefully this time, relieved to find that the shadowy figures were gone.

He remembered that dream too, when he had gotten back to Hollow Bastion, and tried to picture how different things could have went. He'd decided then that instead of him and Sora rescuing Kairi, he would rescue her himself, and together they'd knock some sense into Sora's thick head.
("Why don't you show her how sorry you really are," in the dream Riku had purred into Sora's ear, as Kairi's foot on his head pressed him into the deck, her golden eyes shining as she stood from the chair, ready to unhook the belt around her hips as Riku reached for the belt around Sora's and-")

Riku pinched himself as hard as he could, urging himself to focus dammit and not let his old fantasies distract him.

This was easier said than done, however, when he saw the shadowy Sora, identical to the one he'd made from Sora's shadow on this ship, staring at him like it was ready to devotedly follow his any and every command as it had before.

(Riku groaned, his fingers tightening in inky black hair-)

The shadow disappeared and Riku threw up on the floor of the cabin.

The wizard paced back and forth in front of the entrance to the blank white hall and his feathers standing on end as his grip tightened around the handle of his staff like it might escape from him.

Who is Della?

unca Donald!

unca Donald!

unca Donald!

What was our m-- like?

Ach eye, haven't seen your s----- have ya lad?

who is della
"I can't remember," Donald admitted brokenly to himself, and just saying the words aloud made him feel like he was being torn in two.

"Is this what stole the Queen's memory?" Goofy asked, as they all faced the Trickmaster, the Queen of Hearts mumbling and confused at their backs, the cards helpless without her orders.

"Alice, why don't you stay-" Kairi trailed off, at the realization that not only was Alice not safely out of harm's way, she was already charging towards the large Heartless.

Sora yelped and tried to catch the girl when she jumped in the air to attack one of the stacked heads, and failed to notice when one of the drumsticks slammed into him.

Kairi glanced at him with a wince, and turned back towards the fight when she felt a bizarre and unnatural stretching feeling, the source of which appeared to be Alice pulling the keyblade between her hands and lengthening it like a bow???

Kairi tried to climb onto the table in the centre of the room but was left gasping for breath every time the key-bow bent under Alice's grip and released an arrow of magic at the creature.

Kairi stared as the Trickmaster stepped towards her, getting closer, only for Sora to land on its head, cutting through and releasing the heart. His momentum carried him through, causing him to land on top of her where she perched on top of the room's chair.

The chair disappeared beneath her, leaving her to land on the floor, as the Queen stepped forward and pushed her cards out of the way. "You there! All of you! What is the meaning of this? Where did that creature come from?"

Kairi and Sora began to answer, but as they moved their limbs to stand Sora's elbow jabbed sharply right into her boob, while Kairi's knee slammed into Sora's groin.

"So, you refuse to answer? You're hiding something!" Whirling towards her soldiers, the Queen started shouting. "They're plotting against me! Seize them immediately!"
"Wait, your majesty!" said Alice with a curtsy. "It was you who commanded us to destroy that creature. Your Majesty, in her prudence, didn't completely trust us at first. And so, at Your Majesty's command, we fought them to prove ourselves."

The Queen gaped, her mouth opening and closing like a fish. "I...told you...to do that?"

"But Your Majesty, don't you remember?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" the Queen huffed. "I never forget anything! Of course I gave the command. You did splendidly."

With that, she and her entourage turned to leave, leaving the two teens sprawled on the floor and entangled in each other to continue trying to get separated and upright without further injuring or compromising themselves or each other, while Alice giggled in mischief and Goofy stood in the background trying to understand what just happened and when the Queen gave them orders while his pants continued to burn from the flaming attacks in the fight.

ALICE

The booming voice seemed to shake the world around them, causing all to pause what they were doing.

Please wake up Alice

The walls of the room seemed to start to fade and dissolve, leaving them to look at a blur of the hedges of the Queen's garden, the strange trees of the tulgey wood, and, through it all, a meadow, where young Alice lay sleeping with her sister standing over her and a kitten pawing lightly at her dress.
WAKE UP!

The sleeping Alice woke up, and the Alice besides the group of friends vanished, and like a bubble had popped the world disappeared, leaving them all in a pile on the floor of one of Castle Oblivion's halls.

Donald just stared ahead from his position at the bottom of the pile, resigned to his role as feathery doormat.

"Uh... did the Queen command us to do that too?" Goofy wondered.

Chapter End Notes

So the scene in Neverland with Riku was somewhat inspired by And All I Got by Rikudera. I was thinking of ways I could make Riku suffer in Neverland, and that fit the bill.

Anyway, listening to Project Destati's Darkness, as you do, and I sorta wish I could, like request them for a fansong called "Organization XV" for this AU/an AU like it to incorporate Naminé's theme in it.

I dunno if they do requests, especially for fanfic AUs, but. It's a thought I had, whatever.

So, I felt like sharing the LGBTQ headcanon that have shaped how I've written the characters so far? None of them are. Explicit in the text, and I dunno when they. Will be. But, hey, *jazz hands*

Donald Duck: Trans man! (Trans Mallard??) I'll be honest, this is probably more out of Spite than anything, because some of the Mickey Mouse shorts by Disney have had really dumb and bad jokes about Donald laying eggs and! Ducks that have dicks don't really do that!

Not that I think trans headcanon actually need "evidence" (or can be "disproved" by "evidence",) but there is officially more evidence in the Disney canon of Donald being trans than cis!

Your move Disney, Donald Duck is officially trans, I don't make the rules.

Xion: Trans girl!

Axel/Lea: Trans man!
Kairi: Pansexual and demiromantic!
Sora: Demisexual and Quoiromantic!
Riku: bi!

thank u all for coming to my ted talk, see you next time :)

Next up is Halloween Town, R/R Neverland, R/R Repliku 1, Larxene 1 and R/R Traverse Town.
Happy Halloween! *jazz hands*
EDIT: And Thanksgiving too?? This *started* as a Halloween chapter, and originally was posted as one, but then Union Cross fucked everything!

I weirdly like how Captain Hook is always played by the same actor as the Darling family father, because it implies that he's the symbolic archetype of everyone's bad/abusive/strict dad, and also that Wendy's dad used to be Tom Hiddleston which might actually be funnier.

I also like how Hook tends to be one of the hardest bosses in Kingdom Hearts, which sorta matches how, as much as he loses to Peter Pan, he's also the worst fear of Long John Silver and all other pirates. He's actually, honestly, basically competent, skilled even, he just has a lot of character flaws that get the better of him when wielded by Peter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There was another girl!" the two teens shouted, Sora's eyes lit with mania, while Kairi immediately hunched over, her initial excitement and joy brought down by an onrush of guilt

"Where?" Goofy asked, grabbing Kairi and looking behind her to see if she was hiding someone there.

"No, on the islands," Sora explained.

"The four of us used to play together all the time," Kairi added, her gaze far-off and wistful.

Donald frowned, his eyes narrowing in suspicion and beak twisting into a scowl. "That's strange. Why are you both remembering all that now?"

Sora shrugged, unconcerned. "I'm not sure, but it's been coming back in bits and pieces the farther up we go."

"What was she like?" Jiminy asked, scratching furiously in his journal.

"She was quiet," Kairi said. "Always drawing pictures."

"Whenever we went to the beach, she'd draw a picture of us instead of swimming," Sora continued.

"But one day..." Kairi trailed off, before turning away and covering her mouth with her hand.

"She vanished," Sora said, seemingly not noticing Kairi as she folded more and more into herself. "Just like that. I think our parents knew the reason. They might've even tried to explain it to me. But I was little. I probably didn't understand what was happening. I remember crying a little after she was gone. But that's it."

"So, what's her name?" Donald asked, looking between his two young charges, while Goofy
approached Kairi hesitantly, trying to figure out what was wrong.

Kairi scoffed, causing Sora to look, surprised at the ugly and miserable look on her face. "I don't r-remember," she admitted. "This whole time we've been saying we won't forget our friends... and I can't even remember her name."

Sora frowned, and tears started welling up in his own eyes. "Me either."

Donald, panicked at the prospect of having to deal with actual emotional engagement, immediately tried to head it off. "Oh, I bet you'll remember it in no time!"

"Yeah, a-hyuck! Maybe our lost memories will come back too!"

As the friends walked and talked, Axel sighed at the crystal ball with a smirk. "Looks like their memories took root, just as we planned."

"Marluxia's checking on 'it' in the other room," Larxene said without concern, prompting a glare from Axel.

"She's as much one of us as anyone!" he snapped, before he shut his mouth, gritted his teeth and turned away, attempting to feign disinterest.

Larxene, for her part, didn't need to feign, having seemingly not even noticed his outburst.

"...Anyway," Axel began awkwardly. "Let's see how far our kids can go."

Before he could move, Larxene was up and in his way. "You already had your fun," she said with an exaggerated pout. "This time it's my turn."

Axel look away, before tossing her a card, which she brought to her lips in a teasing kiss. "Don't break them."

"Aw, do I detect a soft spot?" Larxene purred, tracing her hand across his chest before grabbing his jaw, forcing him to look in her direction while she looked away and at the card.

"They're both our comrades, at least partly."

Larxene shrugged off this explanation. "I'm not going to break my toys, Axel. I'm not dumb."

"In that case, you shouldn't mind a fair warning. They're the keys to taking over the Organization-"

Larxene interrupted him by pressing a finger to his lips, an unexpectedly serious look on her face. "If you're in on it too, you should know to keep it under your hood until the right time."

She started to open a corridor, before she stomped off to the doors and threw them open, posing dramatically in front of the tableau of the girl in black pressed to the front of a hooded man before she kicked the door closed behind her.

Axel shook his head at her antics. You would have been wise to do the same, Larxene.
Riku stomped onto the ship's deck, his face pinched, ready to be done with all of this.

"Where do you think you're scurrying off to, brat!" called a voice attached to a hook that suddenly landed on his shoulder, digging in.

Riku paused in his stride, closed his eyes, counted to three, and got to two before he spun and lashed out at the failed pirate, only to pause in shock when Soul Eater was deftly knocked out of his hand with a simple and dismissive twirl of the older man's wrist.

Captain James Hook just raised an eyebrow. "Do you really think you can just come on my ship and do whatever you please? You've made a mess all over me cabin!"

Riku felt himself going faint, as his skin turned green with nausea and he failed not to wonder what, exactly, the mess Hook was referring to was. *It's not real, it's not real* he repeated to himself like a mantra.

*...But neither is he, and what did he see?!*

"Far be it from me to discourage a young lad learnin' the ways of the world," Hook continued, pulling from somewhere within his coat what Riku sickly and distantly recognized as Kairi's black sports bra and Sora's briefs, "But you've got to learn to clean up after yourself, at least somewhat," he added. "I take ye aboard my ship."

"ENOUGH!" Riku yelled, wanting, more than anything, for this man to stop talking.

Hook scowled, and for an instant Riku was horribly reminded of the disappointed scowl of his parents, and what they would think if they knew what he wanted to do and have with his best friends, both of them, one of whom was a boy, *just think of how inappropriate it would be Riku, what will the neighbors think-*

"Don't talk to me that way!" Hook roared, slapping his hook across Riku's jawline and causing a stinging scar that echoed with pain and the feeling of dripping blood.

Injuries from these phantoms tended to fade once back in the white hallways, but here in the memory rooms themselves they were quite painfully real.

Riku dove for Soul Eater, and brought it up just in time to deflect a furious rain of blows from the pirate, each strike rattling him through his arms and jaw, until as suddenly as Hook was on top of him, the pirate hopped away, leaving Riku dazed until he noticed the wrapped box at his feet. Riku turned and sprung away, towards the edge of the deck and away from the supposed present, only to find Hook in front of him once again, furiously swiping with his cutlass and leaving Riku unable to move until he felt an explosion and a wave of heat burn against his back.

He growled and focused on the pain, feeling it as it washed away and melted into anger, channeling the anger into his hand and bringing it into the pirate's stupid face-

There was a shriek, high and girlish, and for a second Riku just smirked as the pirate *burned* until he looked up and saw Sora and Kairi, with their hair mussed (well, *more* mussed in Sora's case)
covered in bruises and scratches and imprints in the shapes of mouths and lips and hands.

Their eyes were wide, and for a moment Riku felt another stirring of shame, and looked away from them, until to be forced to look at the visage of Hook as his skin burned away until underneath his generically paternal face was the face of Riku's mother, always stern and distant, suddenly surging up to wrap her-his hands around Riku's throat.

"Ahahaha!" cackled a voice that sounded like both of Riku's parents, and Captain Hook, and Maleficent, and even Ansem, echoing unnaturally in the open sky on the ship until Riku couldn't take it any longer and, with a strangled scream, poured everything he had into a flash of shining blue rage into that impossible open mouth.

The grip slackened, and a belch of smoke erupted from the lips and nose, before eventually the figure melted into the floor like a shadow, and then releasing black smoke as even that shadow burned itself away.

Riku looked at his friends across the deck, the identical looks of judgment on their faces, before he shook his head and turned to walk off the plank.

*You're gonna have to try harder than that you shitty fucking castle.*

"Welcome to Halloween Town!"

"WAAAAK!"

"You think she'd like it here?" Sora asked Kairi, his voice low while Donald and the skeleton man antagonized each other.

Kairi glanced around, and looked through the gate ahead into the town square, where a variety of ghouls and monsters crept and skulked and lurched around. "It's got lots of interesting characters?" Kairi offered. "Unique silhouettes to draw?"

"LIKE THIS!"

Suddenly, a swarm of Heartless appeared, snapping the friends to attention as one of them, a bandaged Wight Night, spun itself around and then reversed with its arms outstretched and hands grabbing.

Kairi blocked the blow, and Sora moved to dodge only for a vine to wrap around his ankle and trip him. He hissed in pain for a moment, before yanking his leg in frustration, pulling the Creeper Plant on the other end up from the ground right next to him, its beady eyes widening in alarm.

Donald quacked and raised his staff with a cry of "Thunder!" attempting to hit the skeleton man, who countered with his own thunderbolts at the surrounding Shadows.

Goofy ducked under a wave of seeds and twirling claws from a group of Wight Knights surrounding him, and pulled up a tangle of roots each of which had a Creeper Plant at the end, before twirling the mass of vines around and knocking the upright Heartless over.
Finally, as Kairi put her shoe down on the body of a squirming Shadow, she raised her keyblade as it stared up at her—

—*Sora, is that really you, she called to her best friend as he looked up at her with shining and fearful yellow eyes*—

She gasped and fell back, and the Heartless surged to its feet, claws out and ready to pounce, before a blast of fire destroyed it and the tall skeleton posed dramatically in the wisps of darkness as it evaporated. "Nice work gents!" the skeleton beamed enthusiastically at her male friends.

...*Gents?*

"What's the big idea!" Donald quacked with his hands balled up in fists. "Why'd you go and call the Heartless?"

"I didn't," the skeleton answered. "In fact, I'd love to get rid of them. The Heartless go around attacking people, instead of just scaring them."

"Why are they here?" Sora asked.

"I was just going to go ask Dr. Finkelstein the same question. I'm heading to his laboratory right now. Follow me!"

Sora frowned as the long-legged figure walked away, before looking at Kairi worryedly, eyes trailing to the place where she's scraped herself on the cobblestones when she fell. "Kai, what do you think we should do?"

Kairi glared at him, causing him to instinctively throw his hands up defensively, before turning her glare at the retreating skeleton. "We're going," she said with finality.

"I don't like this," Donald said with a scowl. "What if he's leading us right to the Heartless?"

"BINGO!" the slender figure was suddenly right in front of them, his skull twisted into a terrible rictus. "You saw right through me!"

"WAAAAK!"

Lexaeus fidgeted awkwardly on his feet as he rubbed Zexion's shoulders, the smaller man thinking impassively.

"What's happening to Kairi," the giant finally rumbled, prompting an amused look to cross the schemer's face in reply.

"Naminé's shuffling her and Sora's memories as we speak. At this rate, Marluxia will easily get his puppets. He's a danger to us all. Larxene can't be trusted either."

"Nor can Axel," Lexaeus said firmly. "Who knows what that one is thinking?"

Zexion simply smirked, and leaned further into Lexaeus's touch. "Well, Vexen's replica should be finished soon enough. Once he's finished we can speak with him then."
Lexaeus frowned, then shoved Zexion away. "Vexen despises Marluxia," he said warningly. "Think of the mess it will make."

Zexion, for his part, seemingly anticipated the push, and stepped forward at the same time, turning it into a graceful sweep as he turned to face his companion. "That's precisely why it has to be Vexen," he chuckled, his eyes glinting unnaturally in the dark room.

"Better that he clean up the mess than us."

Riku frowned down at the keyblade in his hand, the yellow handguards around the handle, the gleaming silver blade, and was struck by the strangest dual-sensation he'd felt since he arrived in the castle.

He was simultaneously feeling an inviting warmth, the same he had felt the first time he held it in the real Traverse Town, and when he stole it in Hollow Bastion, and a hostility and coldness, hatred, and rejection he felt from it later, when—

—Your heart!? What can that weak little thing do for you—

—My friends are my power!—

—Riku repressed a gasp and simply stood stock still, forcing down any reaction of any kind, even as he felt the Maleficent's smirk at the back of his neck.

He risked a glance at Sora, at the chocolatey brown hair, the adorable look of confusion on his face, and his blue eyes that...

...No, that was right. He stepped towards Sora, and brushed his hand along his friend's cheek, causing him to blush, and the dog and duck (Donald and Goofy, his mind supplied, they're the King's friends too) looked uncomfortable. Sora's eyes were blue, the same as they'd always been, but here, now, it was like there was another layer to them, a filter the same deep, dark indigo Kairi had always had.

Was Sora's hair different too? Were there streaks of red, maybe dark red, or, what was the colour, auburn? Somewhere in the locks and strands?

Was this real? Was that how Sora had really looked at the time? Or was it just his imagination, brought to life by the castle.

Riku scowled and shuddered at the thought of what his imagination had brought out on the last floor.

Sora was in a daze, unconsciously leaning into Riku's touch, so flustered he seemingly hadn't even noticed that Riku was still holding onto the Kingdom Key. "You're coming with us, right?" the younger boy said excitedly, seeming to come back to himself at the memory that they weren't
alone. "We've got this awesome rocket—"

"He can't come!"

"Why not?! He's my friend!"

"Forget it!"

"Uh... guys?"

The two looked up from their argument, only to find Riku nowhere to be found.

"Nice going," Sora mumbled petulantly, and Donald huffed "Good Riddance" under his breath.

Suddenly, a series of purple parts fell from the sky, hands and feet and claws, and as the two adults summoned their weapons to their hand, Sora reached out for his...

...But nothing came.

"W-What!?" Sora squeaked.

"Riku still had the keyblade when he left!" Goofy cried in alarm, "I tried to tell ya fellahs!"

"WAAAAK!?" Donald quacked in what might have been a word or just a general enraged exclamation, looking at Sora in shock, and then suspicious calculation, and then anxiety as he glanced back at the large Heartless in front of them.

"M-maybe we should leave the kid—"

Whatever Donald was going to suggest was interrupted as Riku charged at the Heartless and knocked it to the ground with the Kingdom Key, channeling the revulsion and disgust the weapon sent at him in waves through his hand into a fireball that knocked the Heartless away, before it summoned a portal of darkness around itself and vanished to figuratively lick its wounds.

Riku couldn't pay any attention to any of that because of how furious he was. Now, rationally, he wanted to believe the duck mage wouldn't actually have left a child, a teenager, a friend to be eaten by a Heartless right in front of him, that this was just another trick of the castle wanting him to see and think (and become, again) the worst.

Even more rationally, however, he knew for a fact that the duck wizard had, in fact, in reality, abandoned the same child to be alone and defenseless on a world more filled with more and stronger Heartless than any other world combined.

He lunged forward, grabbing the duck by the collar with one hand, raising the keyblade with another, pointed at the mage's throat, and for a moment he could pretend that the contempt it radiated wasn't directed at him but at the fowl creature in front of him. Goofy, the knight captain, was startled and raised his shield, before adopting a more passive, placating stance and expression, seemingly attempting to defuse or negotiate the situation.

"H-hey now, t-take it easy," Donald pleaded nervously, as the end of the keyblade sparkled briefly with dark magic.

Riku stared at the duck, then at the dog, then at Sora, who simply stared dumbly at the keyblade, his mouth hanging open and unwilling to properly close, his hand outstretched and grasping feebly at a weapon that wouldn't return to him.
"He doesn't even know you're just using him," he muttered aloud. "Do you really think I'd let you do the same to me? And, more importantly, would your king really want you to just leave a friend behind?"

Of course not! came the King's high-pitched tones in answer, his voice echoing and reverberating warmly through from Riku's chest to his fingertips where they had tried to shake hands a few floors ago. I'll have to let the real Donald and Goofy know I'm very disappointed in 'em.

The Donald and Goofy and Sora in front of Riku looked around in shock. "KING MICKEY!?" Donald cried, looking around, forcing Riku to drop him, only to kick his foot upward on instinct and plant it in the duck's wide feathery bottom, in a punt that sent the wizard hollering and flying through the air and with a splash into the fountain shaped like a pair of kissing dogs.

Goofy, meanwhile, took a more contemplative expression. "Real?" he murmured.

Riku turned away in disgust, but with every step away from the scene the weight of the golden-guarded keyblade in his hand grew heavier and heavier, and almost seemed to pull away from him, like it was dragging him backwards to some point.

He looked back, at where Sora sat on the ground, staring straight ahead, while Goofy stood by hesitantly, unsure whether to comfort the boy, or drag his older feathery friend out of the water. Seeing Riku turn around, he seemed to make up his mind, and gently tiptoed over to Sora, a gentle, pleading, apologetic look in his face and posture, pressing a ridiculously soft kiss into his hair that made Riku ache with envy for such a display of paternal affection, before turning and stalking towards his zipper-hatted companion with an abrupt change in attitude to barely-contained rage.

"Who never never starts an argument..." the knight seemed to almost growl, in a bizarrely sing-song tone that, frankly, didn't make sense to Riku, as he continued on his way to Sora, who looked up at the older teen, vulnerable and upset, but with a fire in those indigo eyes that briefly made him worry about a potential dressing-down from their girlfriend his girl friend later before remembering that, of course, none of this was real.

Just gotta think of it like a way to work out my issues ahead of time.

Riku stood in front of Sora, before kneeling, and stabbing the keyblade down into the ground between them.

"In your hands, take this key," he recited from memory, prompting Sora to look up in confusion.

if something happens, and Riku is about to get lost--or say, he starts wandering down a dark path alone--you make sure to stay with him and keep him safe

Riku flushed at the sudden memory, more specifically the way he remembered the blue-haired woman's figure more than anything else about her appearance dammit puberty—

—I wanna be strong some day, Riku had said, and, "Like you, Mister," he hadn't, looking the dark-haired stranger up and down, at those well-defined muscles under that incredibly tight top—

Riku willed himself not to react, for his waders not to tent and for his breathing to remain even and his circulation to remain normal. "And so long as you have the makings, then through this simple act of taking, you will find me, my friends." He placed his hand on Sora's chest, and, after a moment's hesitation, willed himself to lean forward and kiss the other boy on the cheek, and then the other. "So long as we champion the ones we love."

With that said, he leapt to his feet, and hurried out of the door to the district, feeling the three fade
away like the constructs of memory he knew they were.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Wayfinder that Kairi made, and it felt as warm to his hands as the shells of the islands themselves, warmed by the sun.

He didn't notice the way his shadow had changed into something less like his own body shape and more like a hunched over hood.

Walking through the door, Larxene actually had to stop for a second just to process what the fuck she was actually looking at. She always knew her colleague and co-conspirator was a pedo, but cutting a Nobody's tits off with a scythe seemed a little excessive. Even if it would actually work and not just destroy their little Witch outright.

"Hey, hands off the merchandise!" she called, annoyed. "If you're giving out free tit jobs, give 'em to someone who needs it like Axel or the other, less girly redhead we've got visiting." Larxene frowned, then scowled. "Wait, I mean, no, nevermind, I'll give it to her. Or at least trim that skanky hair of hers. Maybe just a crew cut," she said with a giggle, "For when she joins our crew!"

The man simply stood there, and then finally dismissed his scythe, allowing the girl to slowly, almost hesitantly, step away from him. Immediately after she was away he opened a corridor of darkness around himself for an instant before it, and he, vanished without a trace.

Fuck you too, asshole, Larxene grumbled internally, until with a sigh she swayed up to the girl and reached for the zipper on her coat.

She was taken aback, more than a little, when the girl dared to grab her by the wrist with her own hand, and then had the audacity to look up at her with determination, pleading, and, worst and most audacious of all annoyance.

"Please, don't," the girl begged.

"I've created something horrible!" the mad doctor said with glee.

"Gawrsh! What's that!"

"Have you ever stopped to think about 'true memories'?"

Kairi and Sora both started, turning to look at each other before stepping forward eagerly. "True memories?" Kairi asked.

"Hearts are full of memories," the scientist explained, "But not all of them reflect the truth. The heart's not a recording device. Even important memories change with time. They warp or fade,
leaving us with but a shadow of what we hoped to remember."

"Could that be what's happening to us?" Sora asked.

"It happens to everyone sooner or later," Dr. Finklestein said dismissively. "Some memories grow ugly, and some more beautiful."

Kairi was suddenly and uncomfortably aware, at the mention of the word 'beautiful', of the way her heart sped up and heat rushed to her cheeks at the thought of a blonde-haired protector, standing in front of her and shielding her—

"So I brewed a potion from shion flowers that brings our true memories back."

"And as soon as the doctor got a whiff of the potion," Jack interrupted, "Heartless started popping up!"

Donald snickered. "Sounds like a failure if ya ask me."

"My research is flawless!" Finklestein hollered, leaning out of his chair as much as he could to direct his anger more at the duck.

"It's gone anyway," Jack added helpfully.

"Maybe someone stole it."

"Jack! Bring back my Sally at once!"

"We're coming too," Sora announced. "I wanna know more about those true memories."

Kairi nodded alongside him, blushing furiously and not trusting herself to speak.

Riku lurked in an alleyway, leaning against a wall, where he couldn't help but hear the sounds of ducklings squabbling in their item shop.

"WEBBY NO!"

"WEBBY YES!"

Riku leaned away from the nearest window as a grappling hook shot out of it, scattering glass, before returning to his brooding, his head slowly lolling to the side and his breath evening out into sleep.

A hooded shadow loomed on the wall in front of him, before a green jeweled orb on the end of a black staff struck the wall in the center of the shadow's chest, dragging the strange shade away from Riku's prone form and nearer the sharp-faced and horned woman standing regally at the alleyway's entrance. "And what should I find upon clawing my way back from the netherworld, but my old 'partner' hiding from me?"

The shadow's hood turned toward's Riku's sleeping form, prompting Maleficent to simply scoff. "I
still have power over sleep. Sleep holds dreams and dreams hold memories, after all. Why, in this castle I can feel my power growing greater than ever before!" she boasted with a cackle.

The shadow simply hung there, its empty sleeves seeming to raise for a moment, before dropping and hanging uselessly.

Maleficent scowled. "Have you really nothing to say for yourself?" she wondered aloud. "After all these years, Xehanort, have I finally rendered you speechless?"

*In the face of your continued irrelevance, how could I not be?*

Maleficent was taken aback for a moment, her eyes wide in shock at his audacity, the tension in the air thick and almost solid as if the cosmos itself waited for her to snap into rage.

The cosmos would keep waiting forever, as even the shadow was taken aback, as it almost jumped, startled, and seemed to attempt to retreat from her when she simply started cackling. "My my," she practically purred, "And here I had always thought you used to be such a charming man. At last you finally show your true colors." She turned, and with a wave of her hand, the shadow seemed to compress, drawn back towards the boy's frame as if pulled, as she allowed her own form to fade as well. "Our friendship, such as it was, is finished. I shan't forgive you, so if you do return you'd best be prepared to have me as an enemy," she warned, her words echoing in the empty alleyway.

If Naminé had any bones in her neck, she realized, they'd probably be broken as Larxene slapped her hard enough to turn her head all the way around. Even as it was she was dimly surprised that hadn't caused her to fade, or at least knock her out.

If Larxene was surprised as well, she didn't show it, instead pulling the smaller blonde to her feet. "Who do you think you are," she hissed, grabbing one of Naminé's boots and pulling it off, then gripping her by the hips to pull the pants and the other boot off in one motion. "Don't you remember where you came from? It was—"

"Don't you?" Naminé asked in reply, her posture defeated but her tone anything but even as Larxene returned to her torso to pull the zipper down and practically tear the coat off of her, calling for a Lesser to bring the hated white dress. If Naminé was going to have to wear that thing again, she wasn't going to make it easy for anyone, trying to make herself as lifeless and unmoving-unless-moved as she could, like a limp doll for Larxene to play dress-up with.

"Elrena, please," she whispered quietly into the stillness of the room, where it hung expectantly.

Larxene froze, however, her eyes widening and pupils seeming to shrink so much it was almost comical. "What did you say?" She whispered, her voice echoing in the sudden stillness.

Naminé, heedless, and unable to properly read the older woman's reaction, reached out to grab the other Nobody's hand. "It's not too late," she pleaded. "I know what you've been through, if you wanna talk about it then—"

*SLAP- THOOM!!*
Naminé looked up, dazed, from where she had been knocked into— no, sorry, she realized, with a glance at the 14-year-old girl shaped window surrounded by white cracked walls she was looking at, through the wall— to see Larxene clutching her face and hair and howling. A shiver ran through her body and then it seemed like all of her muscles spasmed at once, looking down, she saw sparks dancing across her frame, burning her as they went, and when she glanced back up she saw what seemed like massive bolts of lightning erupting from Larxene's body, scouring black marks into the walls and the ceiling and the floor. A miasma of darkness surrounded the Nymph's body, roiling and making the air heavy and impenetrable, and as Naminé watched, something in Larxene's green irises seemed to burst, mixing and discoloring and spreading like a cloud, changing them to a bright, piercing golden yellow.

"I might have made a terrible mistake," she realized, as that horrible, rasping, sobbing, howling laughter grew and filled the room more and more until finally it seemed to be coming from inside her, echoing and filling in the emptiness where her bones would be if she were real.

"There you are Sally! I thought I'd find you here." Jack strode forward confidently as the group walked into the graveyard on the side of the curly hill, the others following behind his long strides.

The woman, Sally, turned as the group approached. "Who are your friends," she asked, inspecting Sora and Kairi curiously.

Kairi blinked in surprise. I didn't notice before, but she sounds a lot like Sora's mom?

"We're interested in true memories," Sora said. "You've got the potion, right? Could you give it back?"

The ragdoll-like woman looked away from them. "I'm afraid," she admitted softly. "All the doctor did was smell it and the Heartless appeared. What happens if someone drinks it?"

"Are you kidding," Jack exclaimed. "What could be more exciting!?"

The woman turned and frowned at Jack, her eyes deep with concern. "I'm worried, Jack," she emphasized. "Isn't there another way?"

Kairi frowned, and pulled on the skeleton's sleeve. "Don't you have any ideas?" she asked.

"I can't think of a thing."

"I CAN! GIVE IT HERE!"

Sally was knocked to the side, and as Kairi ran over to help her, she saw a large burlap sack-man grab a glass beaker full of a strange liquid— the potion, probably— out of the air.
"Oogie!" Jack and Sally shouted at the sack-creature, who was inspecting his prize curiously.

"One sniff and the Heartless appeared?" Oogie repeated before laughing. "I wonder what'll happen if I chug the whole thing! That'll be scary! It's high time for Halloween Town to taste pain and despair beyond any nightmare!"

Jack Skellington glared. "Pain and despair?" he asked in disbelief. "That's not what Halloween's about at all!"

Oogie made an expression with his mouth that might have been a grin, before shrugging. "Bottom's up!" he tossed the entire beaker into his gullet and swallowed it, glass and all.

Oogie laughed and laughed and laughed, before slowly his laughter slowed down, petering out into a sudden eerie silence, more still than anything Kairi had ever known.

The boogie man staggered forward, and suddenly the hill itself seemed to distort around them, unraveling like, felt? Or clay? And in gaps of it she could see white walls like the castle.

She looked back towards Oogie, and for a moment he seemed to be like a large ant, suddenly looming over her, gripping her by the throat, with giant yellow antennae and terrible golden eyes, the fabric of his sack unraveling and the strings dancing at his sides like electricity.

"Jack," Oogie panted wretchedly, "I don't feel so good"

The stillness burst, and so did Oogie, and Kairi shrieked as everything around her, including the air itself, her friends, became covered in swarming bugs of all varieties. She stared unwillingly, her eyes forced open, as Oogie Boogie's maw opened and a massive yellow-eyed and silver-haired centipede poured through into her own mouth—

Everything went black.

"Surprised? I guess you would be—"

"No, not particularly," Riku said as he tried to ignore the copy of himself. "Lemme guess, you're a fake me that creep Vexen made?"

"Not a fake!" the fake Riku snarled vehemently. "Just because you're the original doesn't make you 'realer' or 'better' than I am! We share the same body and the same talents! But unlike you I'M NOT A COWARD!"

Riku blinked at that, and his lips curled up slightly into a smirk.

"You are!" the Replica insisted. "You're afraid of the dark! The darkness inside you scares you witless."

Riku said nothing to that, but he summoned his sword to his hand at his side, and his body tensed.
"I embrace the darkness," the puppet's rant continued. "I can make it do whatever I want!"

The replica paused, before grinning in a way that was all-too familiar, for all that Riku had never seen it before he could feel his own facial muscles twitching in sympathy.

"For starters," the Replica said, "I can wipe the floor with you."

No sooner had the Replica finished, before Riku sprang forward and kicked the side of the thing's head, sending it sprawling onto the ground and against the wall.

Riku grinned, while his double, with the face of the person he hated the most in this or any world, with everything about himself he despised picked itself up in shock, staring at him as if seeing him for the first time.

"Prove it," Riku challenged.

Riku growled, an animalistic sound that seemed to reverberate throughout its entire body, before it surrounded itself in a cloak of darkness and lunged.

Kairi regained consciousness to (or, more likely, because of) a sharp boot heel pressing itself into her ribs, as she lay prone on the floor next to herself.

...Or, no, wait, that's not right, next to Naminé. Her best friend in the world, who she'd always protect, who made her heart (and her stomach and... other parts) quiver with nerves and desire.

For a moment, she tried to recall how she'd ended up in this position, how she'd remembered these things, did they finish the world they were in, did the strange woman that was stomping her and had just stomped on all of her friends ever actually say anything to them beforehand?

(And, why did she feel like the older woman had forced something inside her, she worried to herself, staring at Naminé's prone, seemingly unconscious body, and seeing the black and green bruises around her slender neck.)

"Get away from her!" Goofy yelled, despite the way his clothes and spin and fur still smoked with electrical burns.

"Yeah!" Donald called, "Get away from her, you bitch! THUNDAGA!"

"Donald no!"

A bolt of lightning struck the woman, who stretched and posed languidly and moaned sensually and suggestively enough to make Kairi go past blushing and straight into a nosebleed.

...Her feelings quickly dried up when the woman continued stretching, far past what a human woman should be capable of, exposing her chest and backside at once and does she not have any bones?!
Donald stopped casting his thunder magic when Goofy and Sora both tackled him, and Jiminy (ugh, eww eww why did just looking at the little cricket gentleman feel so wrong now?) kicked the wizard's staff away before slapping him across the face.

All told, however, it did seem to have a strangely lasting effect on the woman (Larxene, some small shivering part of herself who looked strangely blonde and blue-eyed/green-eyed/yellow-eyed and sounded like she was talking right next to her whispered or hissed in her ear; not Relena or Arlene, certainly not Erlena; or anybody, nobody but Larxene) who straightened up and seemed to act more human, as if for the first time. "Thanks for that," she purred at Donald with a wink and then "I feel much more like myself now," she added, before straightening and shifting her body so she could call behind her "Pay close attention my little princess," (and somehow the way she said it sounded exactly like witch) "So you can see what happens to heroes that try to 'help' or 'fix' or 'redeem' others!"

Kairi reached inwards, and with a yell, charged at Larxene while pulling out Destiny's Embrace and another key, with teeth like a crown, Stormfall, she thought (and my successor she for a moment thought she had heard it say) which she brought down on the cloaked woman's head.

Larxene growled, and lashed out with knives that cut Kairi's cheeks and her top and her skort, and the lightning arcing between them singed her hair, she could feel it, smell it, but none of it mattered to her: "Let Naminé go!" Kairi yelled, before she stumbled on a step forward, and she felt that sharp heel from a boot in her throat—

The world seemed to go out of focus, and lose all colour, she couldn't breathe—

She felt the relief of a cure spell wash over her, and shakily, she got to her feet, staring at Larxene, standing at the end of the hall, as she (presumably???) had when she arrived, Naminé suspended between two of those strange gray zipper-faced things from earlier, only this time one of them, who had summoned a bucket and a mop to clean up some of the blood spilled during the fighting, had dumped the bucket upside down over the pale girl's face.

Larxene sniffed and snapped her fingers in front of Kairi to get her attention, before kicking her again, driving that heinous boot into her shin, forcing her to the ground. She felt the woman grab her cheeks and jaw and glared hatefully back as she saw those yellow orbs staring at her, searching for something. She sighed, as if disappointed, then turned and walked back, her hips sashaying exaggerately as she did. "Pathetic," she called back at the four (and Jiminy) all in varying states of injury. "And I'd heard you were heroes."

Junior heroes, Kairi thought lightheadedly, before Sora stepped forward with his weapon at the ready once again for another round. "Give Naminé back!" he yelled. "She's our friend."

Larxene tutted while shaking her head. "Five minutes ago," she reminded, "You didn't even know her name. And people call me heartless."

Sora growled, and Larxene interrupted whatever he was going to do by tossing a card at him.

"Grow up Sora," Larxene scolded. "If you're all going to keep acting like babies, then here." She tossed a card at Donald, and then one to Goofy, then a final one to Kairi, each one reacting as if hurt. "More memory cards. Now be good boys and girls and say thank you to Miss Larxene!"

Larxene waited for a moment, and when no thanks came, she simply shrugged. "Ta-ta now!" She raised her hand, and in an instant, she, Naminé, the two white suits and the pattern of thorns all over the doors were gone.
(The skittering, shivvery, nervewracking tapping, and *squirming*, as if everything around them were still covered with bugs, remained.)

"...I hate her," Jiminy said softly, and silently, all the others agreed.

**Chapter End Notes**

So, one thing I noticed in [Nomura's concept art](#) is that in it Larxene has blue eyes.

And, well, green is the color you get when you mix blue and yellow. So that's some trivia for you.

EDIT: So, uh, how about those Union Cross spoilers, my fellow kids?
So, I've beaten KH3.

Not a lot changes for this fic, funnily enough, except possibly that I'm a lot madder now. Mad about Kairi, and all the female characters, about KHUX, all of it.

...For whatever it's worth, nothing in KH3 really contradicts anything I've done so far or planned on doing, per se, on, like, a lore or character level. Y'know, except for all the misogyny, obviously.

Which, part of that is because KH3's otherwise contradictory retcons would contradict the other games and itself if not for amnesia, and everyone involved being a liar.

...It's weird to say this, but while I never could have guessed the Epilogue or saw it coming, there's a scene I was already planning for this AU/already sorta basically wrote that might actually be better with the Epilogue content in mind? Not sure how I feel about that.

A detail or two that happened actually sorta matched up with my Day 12.8: First Breaths and Fragmentary Passages fic, so. That's nice.

...Dang, I sorta wanna rewrite that to throw in more direct, specific references to Ephemera.

I'm pleased as shit with how it turned out as it is, and rewriting it would be tough. Structurally. So I probably won't.

Riku grinned as he faced his panting lookalike, he charged forward, and when once more their blades clashed he swept with his leg behind his foe's ankle and when the opponent stumbled he shoved an elbow into the replica's armpit and headbutted him in the chin. The copy stumbled back, landing on a knee.

"Hey, FAKE!" Riku taunted. "I thought you were gonna wipe the floor with me."

The replica scowled. "I'm still new. I'll get stronger, then the next time we meet—"

"There won't BE a next time!" Riku declared, "HAH!"

His blade landed on the Replica's head, and the darkness exploded whipping around and slashing at Riku and sending him flying back, tumbling backward to land in a crouch.

"See what things could be like with darkness on your side?" The other Riku taunted. "You're missing out on the most thrilling—"

"Shut up," Riku bit out, and the copy had the gall to start tutting at him.
"Tsk, so now the coward is playing tough guy? How cute."

Riku looked up and rose to his feet and immediately the Replica froze up and bolted, dashing through the exit.

"Punk," Riku growled.

"Wait up, wait up! WAAAK!"

"There's no time! Naminé needs us! Now!"

Both teens shouted, and turned and ran towards the door in front of them. Kairi and Sora bumped into each other, there wasn't enough space on the steps for both of them, then they glared and started shoving each other, then both of them held up the cards Larxene gave them, shining at the door of the floor simultaneously.

There was a flash, and the entire hall seemed to shake, and when the door opened, the pair rushed through, both squeezing tight to fit through the doorway at once.

"They seem real worked up about this," Goofy noted, trying to keep up with their young charges as they ran on what seemed to be the floor of the sea.

"Wouldn't we be, if it was us?"

"...I still don't like it, though, Donald," the knight argued.

"Me either..." the wizard agreed.

Ahead, the pair of children suddenly stopped.

Swimming toward them was a young woman, with long red hair and a green fishtail for a bottom half, with a large golden fork hidden poorly behind her back.

And behind that woman was a massive whale, swimming towards them with its jaws wide open.

"Aw, phooey," Donald groaned.
"How was the 'real thing'," Zexion enquired politely as he took in the replica standing in their shadowy chambers, wondering when Vexen would take the thing and leave.

"Completely spineless," the replica boasted. "I'll be running circles around him in no time."

"Before that," Vexen asked, "Would you like to meet another hero?"

"You mean his goody twoshoes fucktoys?" the replica asked, and Zexion blinked at the language, and the implications behind it. This was certainly interesting.

"Must you put it that way?" Vexen chided, and Zexion rolled his eyes. The scientist never did have the patience or interest in interpersonal relationships, and while Zexion had never been inclined himself, he would be a fool to deny just how useful they could be.

"Sure, I'll take care of 'em. Maybe even show 'em what a real man is like," said the fake boy, and Zexion was so glad he didn't have a heart, because even as it was, resisting the urge to chuckle at the braggadocio on display was agonizing.

"Let us hope it doesn't come to that," Vexen said with disgust. "I intend to make good use of you."

"They're no match for me," the replica restated, and Zexion hummed to himself.

He had an idea.

Sora groaned as he sat up, then winced when he bumped into something, he looked up and saw what seemed to be a clamshell? He stared for a second, until his mind finally caught up and informed him what he was looking at, and what the clamshells were covering, and he blushed slightly out of surprise and embarrassment.

"Oh, right, those," he muttered, and was about to shake himself before he realized what that could cause his head to bump into.

...He didn't see the appeal, honestly? He'd heard Wakka and Tidus talking, and once or twice, in the showers, he even overheard Riku boasting about stuff that made Sora's skin crawl, with language that he'd never heard before on the islands, even from the raunchiest sailors on his mom's crew, because they always still treated women with respect.
Sora knew it was all a lie from Riku anyways, though. The older boy was always painfully awkward around girls, even the mayor and Sora's mom!

Sora frowned. Did that make it okay for Riku to say those awful things? Sora still wasn't sure, but he didn't think so.

The red-headed lady groaned on top of him, which brought Sora back to his current predicament. He felt shifting around his lower half and suddenly realized that was where Kairi was, making his blush intensify. Most people, whether boy or girl or anything else didn't really affect Sora the way he'd heard he was supposed to be affected during puberty, but Kairi certainly did. Her and Riku and Naminé, of course.

...This mermaid's red hair was really similar to Kairi's, actually, and she looked familiar to him somehow, and he wondered if he had ever met her before, if she could be a new friend he could make or an old one he forgot, and then he wondered what Kairi and Riku and Naminé would all look like as mermaids and oh no, abort, abort!

When Naminé was thrown back into her room she fell to the ground motionlessly with Larxene standing over her, before she felt the older woman leaning down so their faces were almost touching, and finally looked up to meet those golden eyes with her own. "If you ever, try to get inside my head again, witch," Larxene hissed, every inch of her wound tight with rage, "I will show you just how 'nice' I can really be, until you're finally ready to beg for Marluxia to grant you a reprieve from me."

That said, Larxene spun on her heels and clacked away across the floor with her boots, leaving Naminé sitting there. Finally, she dragged herself to her feet bonelessly, and, her wrist shaking, she snapped her fingers in command, a Dusk coming through and bringing a mirror over to hold it up to her. She looked at herself, at her reflection, the flecks of silver in the gold of her hair, the way instead of the deep, rich blue of Sora's irises, or the darker, purple-blue indigo of Kairi's eyes, or even the lighter cyan blue of Riku's, or the sickly green that Axel's were, and Larxene's had been, her own eyes glaring hatefully back at her were a shining yellow.

What did she do to me, she wondered to herself numbly, her hand shaking as it came to her cheek, the way her flesh seemed almost deflated it had become so gaunt, before she had to stop and simply shake her head in sheer disbelief. What did I do to her, she began to wonder, the way she had reached to the other woman's memories to find something good they had, at the barest touch, they simply warped, turned black and white and moldy and green with rot rather than yield anything even remotely positive.

She scowled, (and isn't that interesting, how much easier and more natural scowling seemed now,)
and dismissed the other Nobody, and held her head up and walked through the door to the other room, where Axel and Larxene stood.

"Geez," Axel muttered, "You ladies look like you had a rough time."

Naminé bit back a nasty, biting retort at the man, and instead redirected her ire at Larxene, where it truly belonged (but did it?!) "She nearly killed them," she said sharply, making her way over to her chair as she pulled out her pad and crayons.

"She's right, it was an ungainly performance."

The three looked up as a portal formed and out stepped a gaunt, long-haired blonde with a certain mania shining in the green of his eyes.

"Such a lack of restraint. You shame yourself and the Organization."

I AM THE ORGANIZATION a voice roared from the festering pit in the hollowness of Larxene and Naminé's chests, the latter gritting her teeth and forcing herself not to react.

Larxene, however, seemed to have no such compunction. "How dare you," she seethed, "You little —"

"Easy," Axel chided, seeming wary of Larxene's sudden change of attitude (well, not so much a change, more a matter of intensity really) "Now, can we help you, Vexen?"

Vexen, for his part, seemed to not notice or care about Larxene's aggression. "I came to lend you all a hand. I, personally, remain unconvinced in the potential of these 'heroes' under your coddling. I hope an experiment could lay my doubts to rest."

Larxene groaned. "Of course it's an experiment with you. Everything always is."

Vexen ignored her implied jab. "I'm a scientist," he said simply. "Experimentation is what I do."

"Whatever," Axel dismissed. "Do what you like, but cut the act. We all know this is just a cover for testing your little pet," he said, making Naminé stiffen, as Axel nodded towards the figure standing in the corner of the room.

"Pet?!" Vexen repeated, affronted, "He's the product of pure research!"

"What he is," Larxene cut in dismissively, "Is a toy."

"Hmph," Vexen grumbled. "I see I'm wasting my time."

"And all of ours!" Larxene butted in.

"Have fun," Axel interrupted. "But," holding a card, he said "Take this. A wild card to keep the game fresh." He tossed the card at Vexen, who caught it readily, and Axel grinned. "Now don't tell me I don't respect my elders."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Vexen replied, hunger in his eyes as he gazed at the picture on the card, while behind him, the long-haired boy scoffed as he walked forward.

"It's just a card, what good is that?"

"It holds the memories of Sora, and Riku's home," Axel explained, while Larxene strode past him with a hand on her hip.
"With a little help from Naminé we're going to give you all the real Riku's memories," she told the copy. "Remake your heart to forget that you're fake, until you're just like the real Riku, 'kay?"

The replica stared. "My heart? But the real Riku's a wimp and a loser, who can't even accept his own darkness! Why do I want to be anything like him!?"

"Any objections, Vexen?"

"If it must be done," the scientist said coolly.

"You're betraying me!?"

"I just told you I'd make use of you, didn't I?" Vexen said archly, while Larxene strode towards him.

"Don't worry," Larxene said mock-sweetly, "It'll only hurt for a bit."

"I'll show YOU hurt!"

The replica charged, but was backhanded by Larxene across the face, her hand covered in sparks and wisps of darkness.

"Stupid little toy! What made you think you could ever even SCRATCH me?" she smiled, and walked forward as the copy Riku groaned, looking up in a daze. "But don't worry. When we're done here you won't even remember the embarrassment of me knocking you flat."

"Or anything else."

Naminé closed her eyes, trying to ignore the screams, and for a moment, she considered taking the puppet boy and running, leaving this place and these schemes behind them.

The newfound presence in her chest, made up her mind for her, rooting her in place at Larxene's glare. "Well? What are you waiting for, witch? Do it, get it over with already," or else

If she wanted to be rid of it, she needed Sora and Kairi, she knew.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the replica when he was dropped at her feet, exhausted and spent, what seemed like hours later.

Then, she began to draw.

(Y'know, like a coward.)

Kairi blinked awake when she felt something poking her in the face, then put her hand on what her
head was laying on and blushed when she realized *exactly* what it was, as she heard an adorable squeak from Sora at the contact.

She lifted her head, and when she saw the clamshell bra in front of them she blushed even more, because she could not honestly blame him for that reaction.

Then she saw he was looking at *her* more than the new girl, and she was pretty sure she couldn't blush anymore at that point.

"Flounder!" the woman yelled, bolting up and Kairi yelped and suddenly the clamshells were in *her* face now, and while she wasn't blushing *more*, she, well—

"Riku!?" Hearing that, Kairi bolted upright, as she saw what Goofy was looking at, Riku staring at them (*glaring?*) with a small boy under his arm.

"RIKU!!!!" Kairi and Sora yelled at once and scrambled to their feet, chasing after their friend and grabbing the mermaid ("But I need to take this trident to the Sea Witch to save my friend Flounder!") between them.

"RIKU!"

"RIKU!"

"SORA!"

"KAIRI!"

"GOOFY! A-hyuck," Goofy said.

"I said, PUT! ME! DOWN!" the mermaid shouted, suddenly thrashing, her tail slapping Sora and Kairi both in the face and sending them to the ground, dropping her in the process, to where she glared at them from her new place lying on the weird pulsating whale innards.

"Looking for this, your highness," Riku mocked from above, and they all looked and saw Riku smirking like an asshole and holding the golden fork in one hand while he carried the limp puppet in the other.

"The trident!" the mermaid cried.

(Of course it's a Trident, Kairi realized, *Obviously, why did I think it was a fork?? I've read books before.*)

(...I've been spending way too much time with Sora.)

"PINOCCHIO!!!!" Jiminy cried, looking at the wooden boy in Riku's arm.

"You know him?" Kairi asked, while wondering if she should know that already.

"You want 'em?" Riku called down, "Then come and get 'em" he said, before dashing away.

Kairi and Sora looked at each other, and were about to follow, when the mermaid yelled after them. "Hey! Take me with you!"

They looked back, and she looked at them unwaveringly. "I need that Trident," she said, and they looked back, then at Donald.
"Uh, could you, like, magic her some legs to come with us?"

"But the world border!" Goofy cried.

Jiminy glared at the duck and dog, meanly. "This is all fake, remember? And every second you waste, Pinoke gets further away!"

"...But wait, if this is all fake, then—"

"DONALD!"

"ALRIGHT! Fine!" he waved his wand, and in an instant, the Mermaid was no longer on the ground, but instead standing, shakily, on a pair of legs.

A pair of very naked legs, making Kairi blush, intensely, and Sora slightly, the latter looking away out of politeness and trying (and failing) to make Kairi do the same instead of staring.

"Uh, Donald, maybe you should—"

"I thought you said there was no time!" the wizard mocked, grabbing the woman by the hand and walking off ahead, his own tail feathers swishing behind him. "Mammals, am I right, Ariel?"

"I guess??" Ariel said, as the others blinked, was that her name? Oh yeah...

"...We need to get her a pair of pants," Goofy insisted, pulling the kids into a huddle.

"Yeah," Sora said, nudging Kairi in the side to get her attention, "That's probably a good idea."
Kairi rolled her eyes. "I know that, I'm not *that* bad, you guys."

Goofy glanced at Sora as if to fact-check, and he nodded, looking offended on her behalf, while Kairi just huffed.

"Jiminy," Goofy said, "Are you with the no-pants team like Donald or—"

Jiminy just glared at them, then ran off after the others. "I'm coming to save you, Pinocchio!" the cricket cried.

Goofy sighed, before tightening his grip on his charges. "Alright, gang, here's the plan..." he murmured, before whispering into their ears, encouraged by their determined expressions and resolute nods.

Operation 'Yes, Donald, pants' was underway.

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The members of Organization watched the goings-on stoically, as was their way, until finally, who else but Larxene broke the silence by bursting out and laughing.

"Hey, check it out! Three clams! Ha!"

"I'm pretty sure that bra is from a single clam," Axel pointed out, rolling his eyes, while Vexen just sighed and tried to ignore her.

"What's interesting to me, is, I don't think we've ever seen two World cards used at once like this before," Vexen noted, his eyes gleaming. "Fascinating, to think that Oblivion still has more secrets to be discovered."

Naminé frowned, and waved a hand, causing a Lesser Nobody to bring another crystal ball over to her, and she repressed a shudder when she saw the flower at the creature's bottom.

"Apparently," she informed the others, "Floors 6 and 7 have merged into one floor. The hallway in-between is just, gone."

"Fascinating."

"Not as fascinating as how much of a fuck-up your little toy is, Vexen," Larxene mocked, and Vexen glared.

"Perhaps if Naminé hadn't done such a bad job with his memories, he would be performing much better," he said.

Larxene glared, first at him, then at Naminé. "Are you really going to take that?"
Naminé shrugged. "I didn't want to do it in the first place. I don't really want to do any of this. I don't really like having my powers at all, and the part I like best is just seeing memories, not changing them. Less room for me to mess up."

Larxene glared, muttered 'bit late for that,' and Naminé tried to ignore it. "On top of that, though," she added, "I did what you asked me to do perfectly. You wanted me to recreate Riku's heart, with the addition of being in—"

Naminé swallowed, trying not to feel the weight of the eyes of the others on her. "In l-love with me, and wanting to protect me. Vexen, however, wanted me to ensure that this Riku would still embrace his dark abilities, yes?"

"Of course, naturally," Vexen affirmed

Naminé nodded. "Well, Riku plus darkness plus romantic love equals..."

Naminé frowned, and tried to snap her fingers with one hand while she looked up, away from her sketchpad. "I don't think I know the right term or expression for it? Is it hair pulling?"

"Pigtail pulling," Axel and Larxene said at once, while Vexen rolled his eyes.

"Right, that," Naminé said.

"Then why hasn't he done that to you?" Axel asked inquisitively, and Naminé shrugged.

"Because he already has my attention, I guess??"

Larxene frowned. "We asked you to make him love you instead of those brats."

Naminé actually snorted in response to this. "I'm a Witch, not a miracle worker."

Axel chuckled, and Larxene glared at him, then picked up Naminé by the dress straps. "I'd watch your big mouth if I were you," Larxene told her, and Naminé just nodded, sinking back to the chair when Larxene let go of her and turned her attention back to her sketchpad, drawing into herself.

"Bitch," Axel muttered.

Naminé didn't add her assent or agreement, or even look up, focused once again wholly on her drawing, as the others turned back to the view-crystal, except for Axel, who looked back and forth between the two blondes, wanting to say something but eventually deciding not to.

Sora, Kairi, and Goofy caught up, and for a moment, Donald was almost proud of how accepting they were, that maybe—
And then they stole his fucking hat.

He glared as they unzipped it so it fell into several pieces, than reached out a hand to try to stop them when they zipped it back together a different way, with leg holes and an opening at the top, and then when they gave it to Ariel, and had her pull it up to her hips as a makeshift pair of bikini bottoms he just groaned, sighed and gave up. "Better not smell like fish," he muttered to himself.

"So, Ariel," Kairi asked, leaning in close to the other girl, "Whaddya need the trident for?"

Ariel frowned. "It's my daddy's trident, the one he uses to protect Atlantica, and guard the oceans. My best friend Flounder has disappeared, and it's all my fault, and the Sea Witch Ursula told me if I brought her the trident she could bring him back for me, but if my daddy finds out, oh no, what am I going to do!?"

"Hey, it's alright," Sora reassured, coming around to her other side with a warm smile. "We'll help you out, no sweat."

Ariel looked down with a frown, then suddenly burst into a big smile as she continued looking, flexing and wiggling her toes. "Y'know, I've always wanted to see other worlds, and to have feet," she said, and Kairi and Sora smiled.

"Happy to help," they chorused, before Donald snapped.

"I DID ALL THE WORK!"

"I know the feeling!"

They all looked, and up on another ledge above, there was Riku, puppet over his shoulder, and Trident in hand.

"Riku!!"

"RIKU!"

Donald frowned. It was freaking him out how in-sync they were over this. They always had been, he admitted, to the extent that, he found himself forgetting which of the two he'd met first, as if they blurred together into a single entity. Some sort of Kaiora or...

But this was still weird, though, like they were, almost. His eyes moved to where the puppet was, limp. Like they were a pair of puppets being pulled by a single string, he thought.

He felt witchcraft in the air, in this whole castle, and he didn't like it one bit.

"What are you doing here, Riku?" Sora asked and Donald winced.

"Don't sound so happy to see me, Sora? I'm not getting in the way of something more important, am I?"

"Don't be silly, Riku," Kairi said, trying to be diplomatic, "We came all this way looking for you!"

"But that's not why you're here now, is it?" Riku demanded. "Now it's all about Naminé, right? You two don't care about me anymore than you ever cared about how she really feels."

"What do you mean?" Sora gasped as if struck.

"Just because the two of you want to see Naminé, doesn't mean it goes both ways!" Riku said, and
Donald decided he was done with this, and could only take so much more Relationship Drama inside a Whale, inside an undersea kingdom, inside a castle. Especially the last one, frankly.

"Speaking of going both ways, could we wrap all this bisexual teenage drama up?" Donald asked. "I mean, I've been a bi and poly teenager, I get it, but the sooner we get outta here, the sooner I can get back home to Daisy, Panchito and José."

There was a long silence, until finally Kairi spoke up. "I did not understand a word you just said."

Donald's eye twitched.

"Did you just say you were bi???" Sora squeaked, suddenly embarrassed and shocked, which Donald thought was a little uncalled for, honestly.

"STOP IGNORING ME!!" Riku suddenly roared, which made Donald roll his eyes. "That's just like the both of you, honestly, always getting distracted or slacking off, well I'm sick of it! Just go home, the both of you. I'll take care of Naminé."

Kairi had tears in her eyes. "Riku, we finally found you, why are you acting like this!?"

"Please, spare me, Kairi. Since when have you ever cared about me!? You wanted to just leave me behind!" Kairi froze at that, her face going deathly pale, and Donald sighed and decided they were done here. For real this time.

"Naminé isn't the only one sick of you. SO AM—"

"Kilo Flare."

The boy was knocked back and through a gross-looking sphincter, and Donald stepped forward and grabbed the Trident as it fell, somehow not getting hurt, to his own surprise knowing his luck.

"This yours?" he asked Ariel, as he turned around.

In time for the dropped puppet boy to land on him.

*There it was.*

Ow.

"PINOCCHIO!"

"J-jiminy??" the wooden asked as he came awake. "JIMINY!"

"Come on out! Fake!"
"'Fake?' Oh, I don't think so."

Riku groaned, because of course Ansem had to show up with his worthless opinions. "Let me guess, you're going to tell me he's a model, of what I should be like if I just embrace the darkness so I can be your obedient little slave, again, forever? Tell me, did I miss anything?"

Ansem just smirked at him, and Riku was instantly on-edge and wary. "Why, only your own fear and cowardice. I'd certainly call that 'fake' of you."

"When have I ever been afraid of the dark," Riku snapped.

"You fight desperately against the darkness in the card-worlds. Desperation is a product of fear, Riku" Ansem told him. "Tell me if I need to slow down."

"Do you really think I'll stop fighting the darkness just to prove I'm not afraid of it? Dream on," Riku scoffed.

"Fighting the darkness is one thing," Ansem allowed, to Riku's surprise, "but that isn't what you are doing. You fight the others not because you hate them, or because you hate me, and you certainly aren't doing it because you love your friends," he scolded, making Riku almost feel ashamed?

"You're the one who told me..." Riku started in a low voice then stopped, because why should he ever have listened to what this thing had to say to him?

Ansem paused, then continued as if Riku hadn't spoken. "You're doing all this because you hate yourself, Riku," Ansem said, his voice carrying a surprising amount of sympathy amid the condescension. "You can't possibly think that's healthy."

Riku's eyes narrowed. Had Ansem's voice just slipped there? "Since when are you—"

Ansem growled and threw a set of cards with enough force to knock Riku over when they hit him in the head. "Stubborn boy," he bit out, before vanishing into darkness.

That was weird, Riku thought.

Goofy smiled slightly to himself when he saw Pinocchio, Geppetto and Jiminy reunite, hugging tearfully.

Unfortunately, however, he had some things of his own to deal with. Ariel watched the scene with interest, so at least Goofy thought things were alright there for now, but when Sora tried to comfort Kairi, visibly still upset and shaken by what Riku said, she wasn't having it, avoiding him and pushing him away.
"There's nothing better than being reunited with someone you care about," Ariel said, and Sora and Kairi stopped and looked over to her.

Geppetto looked at her and nodded. "Now that I have Pinocchio back, I just know everything will be alright."

There was a rumbling, and suddenly a Heartless cage and a bunch of other Heartless appeared, and Goofy raised his shield to protect Ariel, but she held the Trident in front of her and made it shine.

"Oh yeah!" Pinocchio cried, as Gepetto held him back, "It's our way out! We've just gotta make enough of a disturbance to get Monstro to let us out! I saw it, when I was trying to find a way out!"

"Is that what you've been doing!??" Geppetto cried.

"I'm sorry father, I didn't want to worry you," Pinocchio said seriously, "But it was my fault we were stuck here! I had to do something to help!"

"Uh, is now really the time?" Goofy asked, blocking a blow from a flying Heartless mid-dive before it could hit parent and child.

The cage lashed out with tentacles, and Ariel stabbed with the trident, and Sora grabbed Kairi and threw her to slash at the creature's head.

The cage's mouth opened widely, and while Sora called out for her, Kairi blasted the core in the middle with a stream of water, pushing herself back, and then threw a card into the maw. With a flash, a lion was there, and its roar right in the creature's gut sent a wave of force that scattered all the remaining Heartless.

"Whew! Glad that's—"

Whatever Sora was going to say was interrupted by a rumbling all around them, and then before they could do anything else they were all thrown out into the open water, bubbles around them as they were scattered across the sea floor.

"AHHHH!"

Riku had never been to Atlantica, but he had met its denizen the one time.

Everything around him seemed like water, but he could still breathe just fine.

...He wasn't sure why Ursula was gigantic, or what the trident was about, but he supposed he'd just have to make do.
He hadn't heard from Maleficent in a little while, actually. Maybe she just didn't like to get wet.

Suddenly he was struck, in a way that felt all too physical, literal even, by a memory, of a person always in the shadows, but he knew now to be cloaked in brown, that always gave him advice on what to do with girls, what to say to them, how to treat them, how to make all the other boys jealous, that all you had to do was grab a girl by the—

Riku threw up, and gagged and backed away when the vomit just sorta floated in the air/seawater in front of him.

...He shuddered at the thought that Ansem was ever friends with Maleficent. As bad as she was, even she didn't deserve that, he realized now.

Ursula jabbed At him with the trident, and Riku parried it and jumped back as he remembered what he was doing. He had to do this, first, he supposed.

"My my, so many guests! Have you made up your mind, dear?" Ursula asked, as the group walked into her chamber.

"I'll do anything for Flounder," Ariel said, "But I need proof I can trust you."

"You said told Ariel she could save Flouder if she gave you the trident," Kairi demanded. "Well, prove it!"

"Of course!" Ursula said with a wicket grin, before, with a flourish and a cloud of darkness (or, ink?) Flounder appeared at Ursula's side.

"I knew something was fishy!" Donald said, and Goofy just gave him a Look behind his back.

"If you want your precious Flounder back," Ursula said, "Give me the trident!"

Ariel made to swim towards Ursula, with her newly restored tail, but Sora and Kairi held her back, putting their hands on hers, and on the Trident.

"You want the power of the Trident so badly?" Sora asked. "Then TAKE IT!" He yelled, and suddenly the Trident started glowing in their hands.

Ursula's eyes widened, there was a golden blast of light, and then she was gone.

Everything smelled like calamari, but nobody felt like bringing it up.

Ariel blinked for a second, dazed, as she wrapped, Sora, Kairi and Flounder into a hug as the latter launched himself at her. "Huh, I didn't even consider that."
"I'm so sorry Ariel," Flounder cried, "She—"

"It's fine, Flounder, as long as you're safe," she reassured.

"But what if your dad—" Sora began.

"ARIEL! ARIEL! Where are you, girl!?" an accented voice cried, making Ariel pale.

"Oh no, it's Sebastian!"

Donald's eyes flickered to the trident. "Maybe you could—"

Jiminy landed on the tip of the Duck's beak, and raised a brow.

"You could just say Ursula stole the trident," Kairi suggested, making Jiminy audibly gasp, but Ariel just shook her head.

"I couldn't do that, Kairi," Ariel said. "I don't want to get in trouble, but I can't lie. Not about this. I know I haven't made the best decisions lately. It was a mistake to take the trident. But I made that mistake because I wanted to help you, Flounder. I'm proud of that. Blaming someone else would mean giving those feelings up. So, I'm going to tell the truth."

"You'll even tell him about your legs?" Goofy asked, and Ariel just laughed slightly.

"Well, now that I know it's possible, and that I can use the Trident," she said, looking at the object wistfully, but with an underlying awe and respect, "Maybe I can give myself my own someday! Thank you Donald," she said, wrapping the avian magician in a firm hug.

"Aw, don't mention it," he said, slightly muffled.

"Maybe someday," she continued as she pulled away, and Donald readjusted his hat (restored to its original configuration) on his head, "I can be queen, and open relations with the surface or other land-dwellers, other worlds, or I can use the Trident to make a new life out there somewhere," she beamed at Kairi and Sora, making them both blush. "Anything's possible, right?"

"Definitely," Kairi said.

"Of course," Sora said, before the two of them were both brought into a hug.

"ARIEL!?"

"Coming Sebastian!" she called.

"Bye guys!" she called as she swam off, leaving the five standing in place, Kairi and Sora red to the ears.

"...Alright, you're right," Sora admitted, "She's cute."

"RIGHT!?" Kairi said, checking her nose, which was fine, surprisingly.

"What did you say about lying, Little Missy!?" Jiminy exploded, and Kairi rubbed the back of her head sheepishly.

"Uhh..."
"Hey there, Hades, Lord of the dead, hi, how ya doin'," the lord of the underworld reintroduced himself to Riku.

Riku just sighed.

...Maleficent was being weirdly quiet, lately.

Riku wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"Feel the heat."

Oh, right, this.

Sora ran forward as they entered the hallway, the moment they saw Riku.

"Take a hint," Riku said.

"I'm not leaving until I rescue you and Naminé," Sora insisted.

Riku turned, a smirk on his face and a sharpness in his eyes. "I need rescuing?"

"Please, Riku," Kairi asked. "Come home. I know I—"

Riku glared at her, and she frowned. Something about this didn't seem right. "I told you two to take care of each other, like always!" he snapped. "Always slacking off together, because you were always just the same! Face it, I'm not coming back to the islands, and neither of you can change my mind!"

"But what about the rest of our friends!?" Sora yelled.

Riku scoffed. "What about them? Do you even remember their names?"

Kairi and Sora blinked, and tried to think, and let out a breath when they both realized they
Riku smiled. "Don't feel too bad. That's just what this castle does. You forget the useless stuff and remember for the first time what matters most. I remembered it! The one thing most important to me!"

He turned and grinned widely at them. "I'm staying here to protect Naminé. Nothing else matters!"

"Hey, Riku..." Sora began, and for a moment Kairi died inside as she remembered their dumb competitions and contests, before Sora summoned his keyblade and sank into a stance. "Mind if I jog your memory?"

Riku smirked again. "Try it."

Sora ran forward, only to immediately be tripped as Kairi stuck out her leg and grabbed him by the arm, swinging him into Riku's stomach with a pair if "Oof"s from the both of them, as she ran over and glared down at them both, Keyblade held loosely in one hand and her hands on her hips.

"What's the matter with you two!?" she yelled, glaring. "Why is everything a fucking competition!? Naminé's in trouble here, we all owe it to her to talk it out, like friends, and make things the way they were, for her sake, so we can rescue her!"

Riku glared up at her, his face just above Sora's butt, his teeth gritted, while Sora grinned up, sheepishly, even with the back of his head right up against Riku's crotch.

Riku held up a hand at her, with a ball of darkness in it, and she stood her ground, ready to face whatever he threw at her head-on.

Sora slammed his head back and made Riku whimper and gasp, and as Sora moved away and forced himself to his feet, Kairi went up to Riku and extended her hand.

"Please, Riku," she asked, then paused in thought, and sank to her hands and knees.

"Please," she begged.

"KAIRI!"

She closed her eyes, and could feel the wind of the blade as it came down towards her neck, she heard more than saw an object colliding with Riku as it flew past her, and she briefly caught the design on Goofy's shield as Donald pulled her back to her feet, away from the boy.

Kairi just looked at Riku, tears in her eyes.

"Stop it!" Sora yelled, glaring, and charged at Riku, who leapt up and slammed his sword down into Sora's guard.

Goofy and Donald charged forward to help and Kairi clenched her fist and gritted her teeth.

She raised her keyblade and with a yell, swung it into Riku's side and knocked him back, sending him cratering into one of the walls with a groan. "What's your problem!? Why won't you just talk to us about it you doofus, instead of acting like such a jerk!?"

Riku glared at her, and for a moment, she saw something strange in his eyes, unfocused and glassy, but it passed immediately, and he charged with a yell, and she ran forward to meet him, only for both to be intercepted by Sora, who twirled his keyblade and knocked their weapons out of their
hands and kicked Riku in the chest to knock him back.

Riku grinned. "Too bad guys, but nothing's coming back to me. Maybe you could try hitting a little harder!"

Kairi didn't say anything, but her eyes drifted to the round indent in one of the walls that she'd literally just knocked him into.

"This is enough!" Sora yelled. "We have to quit pushing each other around, and focus on Naminé!"

Riku scoffed. "What, together?" he glared at them, with such hatred it made Kairi still. "That's just like you two, always worming your way into my heart!"

"Wait, what?" Kairi asked. "What are you—"

"It never mattered to you how I felt!" Riku yelled before, sort of, prancing? Out the door to the hall. Kairi was pretty sure she'd never seen Riku do that before???

"It should hurt, shouldn't it Axel?" Naminé asked him, staring at the viewing crystal while Larxene and Vexen argued in the background.

("Why does your little replica prance off like a little girl? Ha!")

("What's wrong with little girls or prancing!? It might not be the most intimidating method of locomotion but there's nothing wrong with it. You of all people should know better than those hogwash gender stereotypes anyway.")

("...Girly boy! Ha!")

("No comebacks I see.")

("I'll show you a comeback!")

(No fighting, a flower petaled Reaper insisted as it held its scythe in front of Larxene)

(Our Castle's Lord forbids it, another Reaper informed, its scythe also at the ready.)

"What should, Nams," Axel said, trying out the nickname.

Naminé blinked at him owlishly (and something at her eyes was bugging him, but he couldn't place his finger on it, were they always gold like her hair? And did her hair always have white in it?) "Watching my childhood friends fight, and it's all my fault, and," she glanced at another Reaper from the corner of her eye as it bobbed into the room, "Nothing I can do about it. It should hurt,
shouldn't it?"

Axel looked down at her, then shrugged. "Probably. You've got my sympathies, from the heart, of course," he said, and winced when he saw her fierce glare.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"I suppose Nobodies like us, can't ever be somebodies, can we?" she murmured.

Axel blinked, then indicating Kairi in their view. "Oh, I dunno. I think you're probably closer than anyone else, for whatever that's worth."

"Maybe," she said, strangely, the word hanging in air.

"I don't get it," Goofy muttered.

"Get what," Donald asked, trying to avoid looking at the two teens.

"Y'all and Riku both want the same thing, don'tcha? To help Naminé?"

The pair were unresponsive, still turned away from their companions and each other.

"So why are ya fighting?"

"Riku and Sora are always fighting," Kairi said, bitterly.

"Well, the more they fight, the more that they get along, right?" Goofy said, and Kairi scoffed.

"Oh, right, 'the friendship between boys'," she said, "How can I forget?"

Sora didn't say anything, but he glared up at Kairi.

"This is probably your fault," he muttered darkly, and she sighed and hung her head down.

"...I know," she admitted, slumping forward, tears falling to the ground, and Donald and Goofy looked at each other, looked at Jiminy who was about to say something, and grabbed him to close his mouth, and then picked up the two kids and forced their way up the crowded stairs, both of the adults holding up a card simultaneously.
Riku looked down at his remaining cards, then shrugged and picked up the one with a lot of greens and pinks.

He didn't know what a 'Wonderland' was, and he didn't think he'd ever met anyone from there in Maleficent's troupe, but it didn't seem like it'd be too much trouble.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

"IF SHE BREATHES, SHE'S A THOT!" - Ansemku, probably.

"VIVA LA NO PANTS!" - Donald Duck, probably.

...Given how opposed Ansem always seems to be to shirts, we're probably really lucky he and Donald never join forces, lol.

...I'll be honest, like half of why I couldn't get out an update before KH3 is that I wanted to know what Marluxia's Nobodies were called. A good chunk of my writer's block was that I tried to do bits with them and wasn't satisfied with the names I used.

Which. I'm not a fan of "Reaper" either, honestly, but. Eh. Still better than anything I came up with, sadly.

Wish there were Vexen Nobodies or other Lesser Nobodies, but whatever.

...Y'know, I seem salty about KH3 and I am, but my only real complaint is the Kairi stuff. Which, mind you, I hate, and it basically nearly ruined it for me, and sorta soured me on the game and the entire franchise, but. If I step back, I like a lot of everything else. Lots of good moments and good things and then one abominable, terrible, monstrous, evil and hideously, putridly, grotesquely misogynistic thing that ruins everything else.

Male writers that fridge female characters for manpain should be shot, honestly.

Pissed as hell that Kairi's not in the Secret Ending. So there's not even a token effort to pretend to try to do better in the future. Their interests are all too clear.
...I don't remember if I've mentioned this before, but, I kinda want new Kairi outfits for this series? Because, like, I'm hardly a colour theory or fashion or character design expert, but I'm pretty sure pink clashes with red hair, and also why is it always a skirt when she started with a Skort.

Her KH1 design is literally her best/only good outfit, which. It's also sorta her best portrayal as a character in the games, even though she's unconscious for most of it. Sucks.

...A thing I've noticed though is. Kairi always gets the same hairstyle as Utada Hikaru and I dunno how I feel about that.

Like, for this, like. COM was 2004/2005, KH2 was 2005/2006/2007, and Days was 2009.

In DDD, Sora and Riku were their younger selves, but Riku kept his new DDD haircut? That he didn't have in KH1? So.

And Utada went on hiatus at some point and I dunno if she was active in 2012, and.

...And not gonna lie, looking at too many pictures of a real person like Utada and obsessing over things like haircut always feels like I'm being creepy? Like, just let them live, @me.

...I also want Donald and Goofy to have, fucking, Plaid in their KH3 designs, goddammit Nomura.

Plaid Jiminy, Plaid Pluto, just. All of the plaid.

The plaid is a Terrible design choice, like, Objectively, but I kinda love it??

I just wish they actually. Committed to it even more.

Next Chapter: An Extremely Goofy Movie and Ducktales and Riku getting stuck in Wonderland for two chapters in a row.
I have no idea if I should tag this as Goof Troop or Ducktales 2017 or not.

...I dunno if I've mentioned this here before, but my headcanon and my picture for this series in terms of, the Duck characters is more Ducktales 2017.

They weren't really in Finishing A Tempestuous Journey, but the way I picture it is. In this AU's version of Birth By Sleep, the triplets were their classic designs with the caps and Russi Taylor's voice, but in KHI, when Sora and Kairi's heart arrive in Traverse Town after Destiny Islands, it's their Ducktales 2017 designs and voices and personalities, and Webby's there.

...Aside from that, they're all still, like, shopkeepers. Including Webby.

I'm not saying that Ducktales 2017 is part of the Kingdom Hearts timeline in this fic, or that Kingdom Hearts is part of the Ducktales timeline, god no, I just mean the designs and personalities and writing.

I don't wanna rewrite the entire first game just for that, but. It's how I picture it.

...Tonally this chapter is a mess, honestly, but there's beats that I wanted to hit, and I suck and don't know entirely how to make it stick better, sorry.

Also, I don't speak Portuguese or Spanish at all, please forgive me.

...Honestly, forgive me for this chapter in general, tbh, it mostly exists because I love the dance scene from An Extremely Goofy Movie and basically nothing else about it.

That scene is basically Goofy's Zettaflare.

I like Ducktales 2017 and the fandom for it a lot, and "Donald Duck angst" is my favorite genre.

And I like the Three Gay Caballeros.

And so, when I decided, what else besides the dance scene, like. I went with that. Just threw in a bunch of things I liked, mixed them together, and hope'd it'd stick.
black. Things? On their face? Noses? Like a dog??

What.

Their clothes were the same, but when they saw Donald in the sailor suit he had in the field earlier (how did the Castle change that anyway??) they were a little shocked.

But.

Then they saw Goofy.

With a popped collar and a fairly form-fitting purple shirt, a shiny white suit, and an ascot around his neck.

And, for some reason, a perfectly spherical afro.

They looked around where they were, and it seemed to be a school? But the students seemed to be older, young adults in their twenties, and the dress code definitely seemed much looser, with no uniforms.

Nobody else was dressed like Goofy, at any rate.

"Wowee! I look like when I went back to get my college degree!" Goofy said, which answered a question and raised more.

"I used a card too," Donald said, "When am..." he trailed off and stared, as he saw a female duck, with aviator goggles, a dress shirt, pants and a scarf, walking down the sidewalk and pushing a pram with three eggs in it, occasionally stopping to jam out on an air guitar, looking away from the eggs or bumping the pram in the process.

They seemed pretty secure, for whatever it was worth, and it was only for a moment, but Donald's jaw (lower beak?) still tightened when it happened.

Goofy put his hand on his chin and scratched at the afro, making it wobble on his head. "Gawrsh, I'm pretty sure this didn't all happen at the same time."

"It didn't," Donald said, simultaneously harshly and hoarsely. "The castle must be putting them together."

"Oh! Y'mean because we used two cards at once?"

Donald watched as the duck walked along the sidewalk towards either a large vault with dollar signs on it, or a giant mansion, and a giant rocket between the two, then sighed. "Well, if we've got a choice, I'd much rather watch your college shenanigans first," he said, "And just put off living through that again forever."

Sora folded his arms. "We saved the day in both Monstro and Atlantica last floor," he pointed out.

"And I don't think things will go exactly the same, will they?" Kairi asked. "They haven't up till now, have they?" she pointed out.

Donald gave her a flat look. "Things not going the same would be worse, not better."

Jiminy popped up. "But—"

"It would give me false hope, and then when it's over, and she's still gone, I'd have to do even more
therapy to not blame myself for not stopping it," the duck said eerily calmly. And almost understandably? Ish? Well, still not exactly, but with less effort on their parts. Like he'd rehearsed saying and enunciating it a lot.

"Donald started overusing memory projection spells," Goofy whispered, too loudly to be called a whisper. "It wasn't pretty."

"Thanks, Goofy," Donald said tightly.

"Okay," Kairi said, "But what actually happened?"

Donald sighed, then shrugged and headed towards what seemed to be a lecture hall. "You'll both find out later," he said. "Let's get going."

Goofy nodded, then grinned and strode up to the front door, and kicked it inwards before striking a pose with an "A-hyuck".

"Hi everybody!"

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" came a high-pitched girlish scream inside, from a seat in a row towards the front of the hall.

Goofy wiggled his hips and jived to an unheard beat, shooting finger guns at the other students as he made his way down the center aisle. "Imma justa yearnin' for some learnin'," Goofy said, and Kairi and Sora tilted their heads while Donald just facepalmed.

"Oh brother," he bit out, suddenly unbelievably glad he hadn't been with the dog-man the first time this happened.

"Hey Max!" a loud voice from a dog-boy in sunglasses at the front said, trying to be subtle and failing. "Is my vision blurred, or is that your dad?"

"MAXIE!" Goofy cried, as Sora and Kairi looked at each other. Did. Did that just—

"Hey Maxie! Looks like you and me are gonna be classmates!" Goofy said, before pulling the dog-boy in the red shirt in and pointing at him. "He's my son!" he announced, and Sora and Kairi's jaws flopped open.

"Nope," Donald said, grabbing Kairi by the wrist and stomping out, and briefly Kairi and Sora reached for each other before letting their arms drop, Kairi being dragged away while Sora (and Jiminy on his head) stayed in place out of shock.

Goofy's w h a t!??
Larxene burst out laughing, and the others looked sidelong at her.

"Yeah, he's an adult with a kid, what's the big deal?" Axel asked, and Vexen rolled his eyes.

"The looks on their faces! HA!"

Naminé sighed. "Not as funny as the look on your face is about to be," she muttered, slightly strained.

On the one hand, good for Goofy, he seemed like a nice man and a good one, and she wished him his happiness.

On the other hand, Naminé's powers and how tightly wound they were with memory meant that she'd just seen him with his new (old? Castle Oblivion made things confusing) girlfriend, and she had seen things that could never be unseen.

On a hypothetical third hand, however, her powers worked through Sora and those he was bonded with (even if the definition of 'Sora' was a somewhat loose one, encompassing not just one island boy, but also Kairi, as well as Naminé herself, among others) meaning that, all the memories were from Goofy's perspective, connected into Naminé's access through his friendship with Sora, giving Naminé a perspective of this 'Sylvia Marpole' that was, not entirely unpleasant?!

...No, it was still weird, and that just made it worse, they deserved their privacy, what is wrong with you, you terrible little witch—

Naminé sighed, and brought her attention back to the present. "You know," she pointed out, "Before you sampled those memories I was going to erase them. Now with them more fresh in mind, it'll be harder to keep Donald and Goofy under control."

"Who cares about them?" Larxene scoffed, and Naminé just hummed.

Kairi stumbled on the path as she was pulled towards the big mansion, and when they came up to the gate she was prepared to use her keyblade when Donald growled, lifted his staff and destroyed it with an explosion.

A massive duck-woman, big, built and burly, with a stern gaze and an apron over fine purple clothes looked at Donald, and a Dog-man (who seemed sorta sick? but still stern) beside her seemed to be about to shout...
But then they and Kairi all caught the look in Donald's eye, and decided to keep quiet, visibly backing down.

"DONALD! WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU!" A voice called, one Kairi thought was vaguely familiar.

Donald stopped in his tracks and froze. "Daisy!?" he asked. "What're you doing here!?"

"I was dropping off our boyfriends for your date on my way to work, sorry, but I really do gotta go," Daisy said, hurrying past Donald and lifting him up into a kiss, before stepping into a car and driving off after she put him down.

Donald's mood seemed to lift when a green parrot and a red rooster suddenly squeezed in around him.

"¡Mi amor!"

"Te amo!"

Kairi just stood shocked, as the future she pictured for herself, whatever lied beyond the next morning flashed before her. "Our boyfriends," she whispered to herself, images of herself and Naminé, Riku and Sora flooding her mind, as a tear went down her cheek, was it really okay—

She blinked, because the parrot and rooster were in front of her now. "Um."

"My name, is José Carioca!" the parrot introduced himself, tipping his hat and bowing while pulling his umbrella to the side, and grabbing her by the hand.

She blinked, because the rooster had grabbed her by the other arm. "And my name is Panchito Romero Miguel Junipero Francisco Quintero González, the third!" the rooster, Panchito introduced himself, both bird-men shaking her arms furiously.

Her arms were crossed in front of her, awkwardly, and she hoped they'd let go soon. "Uh, Mr. Panchito Romero Miguel Junipero Francisco Quintero González, could I just call you Panchito?"

"Haha! Very good! But, don't you want to know how I got my name? OHH~"

"No!" Donald shushed, pushing his beak against the other bird's to silence him with a kiss, before pulling away and leaving him dazed and pouting. "We don't have time for that song, Kairi needs to hear the other one!"

"Ay caramba?" José asked. And Donald shook his head.

Panchito blinked. "Oh, your name is Kairi? What's your last name?"

Kairi blinked. "What's a last name?"

José frowned. "Donal', when you called us and called Daisy to bring us up even though your uncle hates us, I thought it would be to spend time together, not to perform for a girl we don't know."

Donald sighed. "I didn't call you," he finally explained, "Della did."

"Ah," Panchito said. "No wonder you were so easy to understand over the telephone. And in Spanish too!"
José looked crestfallen. "What kind of partners are we, to not even notice," he said sadly, and Donald kissed him on the cheek.

"A better partner than I was, for getting mad and not just explaining the first time," he said sadly, before pulling José and Panchito with him towards where the gummi ship still stood. "Come on! We'll do the song on the way!"

The other two ran on ahead, but Donald stayed back with Kairi and sighed. "They aren't real," he said softly.

Kairi considered reaching out to him, but he shook himself before she could. "It's still good to see them again though," Donald said with a smile and a blush, before seemingly noticing Kairi was still there and grabbing her to pull along.

Max Goof rubbed his temples in despair. "Dad," he said.

"Yes, son?" Goofy responded.

"Dad, lose the wig."

"But—"

"Lose. The. Wig."

Goofy looked at Sora for support, and Sora shook his head, and then Max grabbed the Afro, and Sora incinerated it with a fire spell, the two boys giving a high five.

"Aw," Goofy said, disappointed.

"Now, let's get goin'," Max said, "We've got team practice to do."

Goofy blinked, shocked, tears in his eyes, mouth quivering. "Ya want me on yer sports team?"

Max shrugged. "Well, yeah, dad, of course, I love ya, after all, but mostly I want him," he said, pointing at Sora.

Sora blinked. "What? Me?"

"Yep," Max said with a grin.

"Why me?" Sora pressed.
"Because you might just be the best skater this school's ever seen," Max said, to Sora and Goofy's surprise.

"How can you tell that?" Sora found himself asking, even as he felt like, he knew somehow.

Max hummed, and for an instant, Sora thought he saw double, or more, of a blonde boy asleep in a throne, and a dark-haired boy smirking until both images faded and Sora just saw Max.

"Oh, just a hunch, brother," Max said easily, pulling Sora towards the skatepark with Goofy trailing behind.

Kairi blinked. "Uh, guys?" she asked. "Someone's—"

"We're ready!" Donald announced, as they pulled out their instruments, an umbrella that was somehow a horn and a flute, a guitar, and a double bass.

"We're Three Caballeros,"

"Three gay caballeros,"

"They say we are birds of a featherrrr~" and suddenly, the two and Donald were flapping their wings and actually flying.

"We're happy amigos, No matter where he goes, the one two and three goes we're always together!" the "one two and three" was punctuated by them pressing themselves together and wrapping each other in a hug.

"We're three happy chappies, with snappy serapes, you'll find us beneath our sombreros!" Kairi wasn't sure where the props were coming from.

"We're brave and we'll say so, we're bright as a Peso!" Panchito said as brandished a bright silver coin.

Kairi was confused. "Who says so?" she asked.

"WE SAY SO!" and suddenly she was sweating as she had a pistol from Panchito, José's umbrella and Donald's staff under her chin, while she raised her palms up in surrender.

"The Three Caballeros!" the trio sang, breaking apart and swanning away from her, to Kairi's relief, even as she still felt a little uncomfortable from the other person in her personal space right now.

"Ahhhh~! We have, the stars, to guide us! Guitars here beside us! To play as we go!"
"We sing and we samba!"

"We shout, 'Ay, caramba'!"

"What means, 'Aye caramba'?" Della Duck asked, leaning casually on Kairi, as she had been the entire song.

"Oh yes, I dunno," Panchito said with his hands up.

"Ohhhh!" the three vocalized, and Kairi wanted to wince at Donald's voice, but the other two actually, balanced it out? And harmonized with it somehow?

She glanced down at the duck that may or may not have been holding her hostage, it was hard to tell, expecting to see a soft expression and instead finding only seething, deceptively calm anger.

There was something about this duck-woman that Kairi was confused by, but she couldn't place it.

"Through fair, or stormy weather! We stand close together!" the three pulled each other into a hug again, cheek to cheek.

"Like books on a shelf!" Kairi smiled but blushed and felt awkward when they started kissing.

"And pals though we may be, when some angry lady, finds out we dropped her baby!" Della smiled darkly and Kairi had a sudden premonition about how the next several moments were going to go.

"EACH MAN IS FOR HIMSELF!"

José and Panchito scattered, tipping their hats to Kairi and Della, and blowing kisses to Donald as they ran, and Kairi honestly couldn't blame them at the stormy look on the duck-woman's face.

"Hey, Don? Remember how I told you I didn't want to see you and your band friends again?"

Donald didn't react, and just smiled sadly. "Hey, Della."

Della glared. "Uh," Kairi spoke up, "In fairness, he has been having issues with his memory late-ow!"

Donald sighed. "Let 'er go, Dells."

Kairi felt a shove, and when she rolled on the ground and spun around her jaw dropped because holy shit that's a keyblade.

Donald frowned. "You didn't try to fight me last time," he noted, seemingly unphased by the weapon, and the look in Della's eyes intensified.

"Last time?" she said in disbelief. "Last time you weren't here with your shitty friends right after you dropped my son." she hissed, sounding more like a goose than a duck.

Donald blinked. "Wait, you—"

"You remember, why shouldn't I?" Della asked. "I might not be real, but I'm still your twin. You made me from your memories, why wouldn't I know what's in them?"

Donald blinked. "...I'm sorry I called you a slut," he said, and Della sneered, (which, Kairi thought was a weird expression for a duck beak to have, honestly) at him.
"Real progressive of you, wasn't it Donny? Not at all hypocritical with your own 3 partners, was it?"

"Our relationship is committed," Donald said, angry now, "And while it was wrong for me to say that, it doesn't make our situations the same!"

"Um,"

Della glared at Kairi now. "And, what do you do when you see a reckless pansexual, expert pilot keyblader that flirts with everyone she meets? You replace me with—"

Donald punched Della in the face, and sent her rolling back. Kairi readied her keyblade to join, but as she moved forward Donald waved his staff, and Kairi had to skid to a stop before she crashed into a sudden magical barrier.

"I thought you'd like her," Donald finally said, with his staff still at the ready. "That you'd want me to encourage someone like you instead of tearing them down."

Della snorted. "Well, we'll never know what the real Della would have wanted, now will we?"

"Guess not," Donald replied.

The air went still as they stopped talking, and Kairi wondered whether she should say or do anything.

"MEGAFLARE!"

"HOLY!"

Nevermind, she thought to herself, she was just going to wait out here and let them deal with it.

---

Sora dodged around a pair of pedestrians and grabbed onto a post to spin himself around, flinging himself at one of the handrails that went down the stairs in town, sparks flying as he rode the board down it, down to the fountain in the cobblestones of the square—

"Ven!?"

"Sora!"

Sora skidded to a stop when he heard Max and Goofy calling for him, and peeled off the helmet.

"We gotta go, there's somewhere to be," Max said, while Goofy seemed, lost? Dazed? And he was blushing?
"But what about the course record!" Jiminy cried, "You have to earn more points before you can—hey!"

Sora ignored the cricket, and was surprised when he was lead by the college student and the knight (who was a college student in this world?) into a dance club.

He slid into a booth with Max's friends Bobby and P.J and mostly ignored when girls asked Max to dance, though he thought it was nice how respectful P.J. was to the girl with the Beret. It made him smile, and in his head he admittedly went a little overboard thinking about how cute they were together.

...He wondered, blushing, how Naminé would look with a beret.

Then the music changed. Sora looked up, and his jaw dropped. The lady Goofy was dancing with (Sylvia?) looked nice, he guessed, but what got his attention was the confident look on Goofy's face.

Sora stared in shock as Goofy and Sylvia twirled and shook their hips, when Goofy dipped her without dropping her and then began dropping in a series of synchronized splits towards the floor.

Max started tapping the table and danced to the music, and looked at Sora a little judgmentally, almost? Sora got up and decided to dance a little too, but stopped when he saw Goofy, spinning around on his hands but what really caught the teenager's attention was the look in the older man's eyes and the way it matched the same look in the woman dancing with him.

"Hey, Larxene?"

"Yeah?"

"What the fuck," Axel asked succinctly.

"Fuck is what," Naminé said idly, continuing a drawing now, one of a blonde boy on a skateboard across blue rooftops, a pink haired boy, a white haired boy, and a dark haired girl behind him.

Larxene frowned as she glanced at it. Why did it seem familiar somehow.

"Look what you've done," Vexen scolded. "With your vulgarity, you've corrupted our youngest member, the both of you."

"Oh, trust me, the memories from this world card are way worse than anything I could do alone," Larxene said, though instead of a boast it seemed almost, regretful in tone?
"...Please tell me we won't have to see any of it."

"You won't, don't worry," Naminé reassured him, still focusing on her sketch.

Larxene blinked. "And you can?"


"Popular kid," Axel commented.

Naminé smiled to herself, as if to say 'you don't know the half of it', but aloud she only said "Yes."

Vexen hummed, his eyes lighting with curiosity that before might have made her skin crawl. "Do you have a hypothesis as to why?"

Naminé seemed about to say something right away, then paused, looking at Larxene, eyebrows arching over yellow irises in confusion. "Well," she finally said, "Kairi and Sora aren't just good friends, her heart actually resided in his, for a time. That's why I'm here. And even if I wasn't, it still leaves a connection between them both."

Her hand raised before she forced it down, seemingly struggling with something, and trying to downplay it.

"Sora is very outgoing, and easily makes connections with others. Kairi less so, but even before, their personalities were similar," she said, and the others looked at her expectantly.

"So," she continued, "Naturally these powers of mine reach to their friends and family as well."

"So you know how they—"

"Yes, Axel," she said, with strain in her voice, "I know how they do. Things." Then she glanced at Larxene, not quite a glare but close to it. "But the memories aren't always so close to the surface that they're practically forced on me."

Larxene's yellow eyes narrowed. "What about people that aren't 'friends'?" she asked back, and, Naminé stiffened and nodded at that.

"Well," she said, "Even a bond between enemies is a bond, if you think about them enough, and," her fingers traced the finished image, the way that behind the pink haired boy watching the skateboarder was an orange haired girl and a girl with yellow hair spiked into two antennae, "If all of the bonds are close enough, even a friend of a friend could do."

Vexen hummed. "Fascinating."
"DONALD!" Kairi cried, rushing forward when the barrier shattered, readying a cure spell.

Only to find Donald was the one standing, relatively unharmed.

The fallen Della at his feet vanished, and Donald sighed and turned towards the nearby Gummi Ship, with "Spear of Selene" emblazoned on the side. As they watched, it rocketed into the sky, and then vanished, the darkness between worlds enclosing around it.

Donald sighed, and concentrated, and then they were instantly standing in an office, another Donald than the one with her standing between a pram full of eggs and a duck with whiskers and a top hat, screaming.

The King stood by to the side, with his head down, a sad look on his face, and Donald scowled at him before turning away in disgust and stalking out the room with the eggs, slamming the door behind him.

She saw Donald with the rooster and parrot from earlier, juggling the eggs, and winced when one fell from his grasp.

She saw Donald with three ducklings with a mix of joy and love and mourning pouring from his posture.

"Don't fight with the ones you love," the Donald next to her finally said. "I know it's hard, that sometimes, things happen, or you disagree. And," he added, glancing at her, "If someone's hurting you, you don't just have to take it either," he said, and Kairi frowned. Did she really seem like that much of a doormat?

"...Tell me about her," Kairi finally said, and Donald chuckled.

"I haven't even told my— her own boys, Kairi, I'm sorry but I don't think it'd be appropriate." he finally said.

Kairi shrugged, and plucked some grass from the field around them. "Well, you need to tell them someday," she reasoned, making him wince with hurt. "You could probably use the practice," she then reasoned further, making him look at her thoughtfully. "Besides," she added brightly, "With how things are going, I'll probably forget anyway."

Donald snorted.

"Orrrrrr," she said mischievously, "You could tell me all about those cute boyfriends of yours," and Donald actually smiled at that.

"Sorry, but I think you've got enough boyfriend trouble of your own right now," he said, making her blush. "Get back to me when you three have sorted it all out."

"The four of us," Kairi insisted, but Donald just shrugged.

"You should really let Riku go if you ask me," he said.

"Heeeey!"

"I'm telling you," Donald insisted, "Somethin' about that boy ain't right!"

"You don't even know him," Kairi said sadly.
"Because he keeps trying to kill us," Donald said.

"What about Sora," Kairi asked, interrupting and not wanting to talk about this anymore, as well as morbidly curious despite herself.

Donald shrugged. "I mean, I've got some spells if you need him to sit still for five minutes," and then when Kairi blushed he groaned at her. "Oh, get your head out of the gutter, that's not what I meant."

"What about," Kairi asked, "Me and Naminé?"

"I dunno, I've never met her," Donald said, "But I give you five minutes before you make it weird by talking about how she smells."

"Hey!"

Riku sneezed, then huffed through his nose and sniffed the air, hoping he didn't lose track of the scent of darkness all around him.

Riku was upside down, blinded, and disoriented, but the good news was that Maleficent wasn't bothering him anymore.

Meaning he was lonely and isolated and had no one to talk to.

...Shit.

Somehow the group of friends stepped out together, despite being separated in the world before. Cautiously, Donald and Goofy peered around the hallway, while Sora and Kairi hung back.

"Where's Riku hiding?" Donald muttered.
"Maybe he's finally tired of fightin' with ya, huh? Goofy asked, towards the shaking Sora (and Jiminy) while Kairi tried to comfort him.

"Kairi?" he finally murmured.

"Yeah?" she prompted, trying for comforting.

"I think Goofy fucks."

Kairi froze in place staring blankly, as if trying to process the information she had just been given, while Goofy blushed.

"Gawrsh, you guys, it was just dancin'," he said bashfully, but Jiminy shuddered and spoke up.

"You said that in the original version you went home with her that night!" the cricket cried, and Sora and Kairi looked at the bug as he pulled out his journal.

"Why would you write that down," Sora asked.

"Also, wait, did he say earlier that he has a son???" Kairi asked.

Donald sighed. He had hoped talking about how he'd never see his sister again would have given the girl some maturity, but no, of course not.

"Let's just get moving," he said brusquely, dragging the kids behind him towards the next floor.

In the realm of darkness, there's a beach, with dark waters cresting into waves and crashing on dark sands, where boulders and crags dot the shoreline and arches of strange, almost organic looking coral-like rocks rise into arches in front of the horizon.

On that beach, two women sat, one of them a human with blue hair, the other a duck with aviator goggles.

The blue haired woman turned over a card between them, then sighed, and reached for the laces of her corset when she saw what was on the face of the card. "I fold," she admitted, smiling shyly, one of her first smiles in what felt like an eternity, as she started getting ready to add the corset to the clothes pile with her boots, arm bracers, sleeves, stockings and the scarves she usually wore around her hips.

The duck, wearing only an open bomber jacket, goggles, a scarf and a melancholic smile, reached for the deck to shuffle it again.
listen, i'm not saying that aqua/della duck is my otp

but. listen.

...The line from Blank Points about "Two who were never meant to meet" is way more applicable there than it is for Aqua and Ansem the Wise, you have to at least give me that.

Also: *ventus voice* skateboards

*co voice* but—

*ventus voice but louder* SKATEBOARDS!

*co voice* alright, fine, geez

This chapter was going to have more skateboarding in it until I remembered I have no idea how to write about skateboarding. Or dancing. i have no idea how to write anything why am i doing this

The way I see it, Roxas and Sora skateboard in II, but never in Days, (and aesthetically Twilight Town is really similar to Daybreak Town) Ven's keyblade glider is a board, and Vanitas likes to ride on keyblades. So.

...Also also, if there's a hill I'm willing to die on it's that Kairi is at least as much of a Sora as Ven is, fucking fight me.

I really love Hold Your Violet Tiara High.

I realized, partly because of reading that fic, mostly because I had to climb up and down Arendelle 3 fucking times and accomplished less than nothing, that I should stop trying so hard to be exactly like Disney and KH and be more. Sincere. Earnest. About everything.

...Screw it, if I'm just posting Ducktales 2017 fics I like. Overheard, After Grief, and three eggs equals four kids

Basically everything by mandaree1

Next up: Hollow Garden/Radiant Bastion and Wonderland 2: Somehow It Gets Worse
...Just to be forewarned, there's a decision I make in the end of this chapter that has been in my notes for about two or so years now, and while I was never entirely happy with it, KH3 and what happens there made it so much worse.

Unfortunately, with the way I have some things planned out. I also still sorta needed it to happen, to do some things I want/need to do going forward, that I've had planned for, again, years.

I'm sorry.

On a different note, I think about [this quote](#) a lot in terms of Maleficent in KH. It's. There's room for character depth there without necessarily making her turn good, and I sorta like it a lot.

Maleficent should basically adopt Vanitas is what I'm saying.

...Man, writing this chapter was an emotional journey, because in some ways it's sorta the end, at least, of the story as I've written it so far, starting all the way back in Tempestuous Journey.

Everything I've planned since I started Tempestuous Journey has relied and depended on this one change, but it's still. Kinda sad. And I'll miss it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"We've come a long way," Donald observed, shivering at the thought.

Jiminy sighed, "And who even knows how many memories we've lost," he said, before turning towards the teens. "It's not too late," he pleaded. "We can still turn back."

"No," Sora said, shaking his head. "That would be breaking my promise."

Kairi blinked, and looked at him, tense. "What do you mean your promise," she asked.

"When we were little," Sora explained, "I made a promise to Naminé. I told her—"

"That you'd keep her safe?" Kairi demanded. "That you'd protect her?"

Sora blinked. "Wait, how do you—"

"I made that promise, you dick!" Kairi shouted, grabbing him by the jacket, until he roughly pushed her away. "With the wooden sword—"

"What!?" Sora was alarmed now. "You know about that too? Don't tell me you know about the charm?!"
"I'm the one she gave it to!" Kairi insisted, and immediately the two glared and started digging through their pockets, until a number of knicknacks and trinkets were on the floor, Sora and Kairi both searching through them and getting more and more frustrated, until finally, they both snapped.

"WHAT'D YOU DO?"

"WHERE DID YOU PUT IT!?"

"HOW COULD YOU—"

*SLAM*

Donald knocked their heads together when they got close, nearly snarling at each other, and Goofy picked them both up and set them apart, to opposite sides of the Hall, where they both silently glared at each other.

"Well, I guess we're turning back," Jiminy said aloud, going through the pile of pocket items. "Because I don't see how we're supposed to go on ahead."

Everyone blinked, and then Donald and Goofy patted themselves down.

They were out of cards.

Naminé watched as they fought in the crystal, disappointed in how easily friends, even close ones, who loved each other more than anything else could be turned against each other, no matter how pure they were at heart. As she watched them sulk, rather than heading forward to the next floor, she frowned, then counted on her fingers, then paled slightly when she came up short. "That's not good," she realized aloud, while Larxene pressed behind her.

"I'll say," she said. "Looks like your little toy isn't doing what he was made to."

"Now now, give him the benefit of the doubt," Axel said, "Maybe he's just hiding to lure Sora and Kairi further in."

"Oh, right, that must be it, my bad," Larxene said sarcastically. "I guess I'm just used to Vexie's research being more funny than formidable."

"That's not what I meant," Naminé said, but was interrupted.

"Silence!"

"Predictable as always," Larxene said flatly. "Aren't men without hearts boring, Naminé?"
"You're hardly one to talk, you little—"

"WHY ARE THEY JUST STANDING THERE!" Naminé just shouted, while another voice said "That's enough."

Naminé froze, and lowered her head, he was here, and she was in the dress again, and—

"Marluxia!" Vexen said, somewhere between a sneer and a snarl.

Marluxia ignored him and approached Naminé. "Sorry," he said to Vexen, "first things first, did you say something, Naminé?"

She swallowed, and then pointed towards the crystal. "They aren't going to the next floor." She looked up, and said, accusingly, "The rest of you didn't give them enough cards."

Axel blinked. "I gave them four, and Larxene gave them four, and..." Axel's eyes widened in realization. "Oh."

"Perhaps it's your turn," Marluxia told her, and she nodded, reaching out with her powers but the moment she did so it was like they shined and pushed her back, and as she saw in the crystal, the keyblade appeared in Kairi's hand with its red handguard and black blade with teeth shaped like an empty heart, and Kairi's necklace shined brilliantly, and a pink and purple beam fired from the keyblade through the light of the necklace, and when the lights faded a card appeared in the air.

"Oh no," Naminé said, and Marluxia looked at her, scrutinizing, before finally he turned away.

"Your project has nearly failed us twice now. Do not disappoint me again, Vexen" he said.

"Disappoint you?" Vexen said. "You presume too much! In this Organization you are merely number eleven, I am number four and I will not stand for—"

He was cut off by a scythe materializing with the blade pointed towards his throat.

"You will stand for what I order you to stand for," Marluxia said cooly. "The castle and our fifteenth have been entrusted to me and my custody, as Lord. Defying me and defying the Organization are one and the same."

Everything he had said had been true, Naminé realized, which was, frankly, incredibly confusing, given her own orders. Moving against Marluxia at this stage was impossible, even still.

He could, officially, do basically whatever he wanted, at least for now, and within reason.

_Why_ they would set it up this way, Naminé had no idea.

"Treason's a capital crime, isn't it?" Larxene pointed out mock-innocently.

"I officially pronounce this project of yours a failure," Marluxia said dismissively. "You realize, of course, that I will have to report this lapse to the Superior," Marluxia said, and Vexen froze.

"Leave Him out of this," he nearly begged.

"I'm afraid I have little choice," Marluxia said with false sincerity. "It isn't as though you have any hopes of facing one keyblade wielder personally, much less two."

Vexen held himself up at that, pride lighting itself to life in his eyes. "Of course _You_ would only see the surface of things," he boasted, "Understanding little as you do my _true_ might."
"Then prove it," Marluxia said, finally lowering and dismissing his weapon.

"...What?"

"I don't wish to place doubts on a comrade," Marluxia said, "Not unnecessarily. Prove your own strength, without a doubt, and perhaps this lapse in judgement of your projects can be, shall we say, overlooked."

"Your insincerity is as comforting as it is unwelcome," Vexen said, before coridoring away into the shadows.

Larxene blinked. "That was a confusing sentence," she pointed out.

Axel frowned. "Hey, what are you playing at here exactly? After that, Vexen's going to want to eliminate Sora. Kairi too. Whichever one of them he can get his hands on. He won't have a choice."

"An unfortunate denouement indeed," Marluxia said, leaning over Naminé's shoulder and looking at the view Crystal with her, at where the four heroes stood in the hall.

Kairi blinked, as she held the card in hand. "Naminé?" She asked, looking around, "Did Naminé give me this? I just saw her..."

"Another lie," Sora said, shaking his head, "Kairi, I thought you were better than—"

Donald hit him in the shin with his staff. "Sora, shut up."

"This doesn't make sense, guys," Goofy pointed out. "You can't both have the same memory."

"Then, which of us do you think is right?" Sora demanded.

"I say you're both wrong," Donald said, making both teens turn on him, even as Jiminy and Goofy nodded and joined him in solidarity.

Marluxia scowled, shaking, and his grip on Naminé only tightened.
“Y’know, you never did give me a separate script for Kairi,” she pointed out unhelpfully.

(Like a dumbass, she decided that now was a time to *antagonize* him of all things.)

Thankfully, however, he simply hummed at her words. "I believed that turning them against each other would make them more vulnerable, and easier to ensnare."

"You underestimated the king’s men,” she said, and Marluxia simply smiled at her defiance.

"And I believe you overestimated them," he said, pointing to the crystal, where Kairi and Sora fought over the world card, pushing Donald and Goofy aside, and then scrambled madly to the door to the floor.

Naminé sighed, because he was right, until suddenly, the instant Sora used the world card, a new presence entered her awareness.

In an instant, massive thorned vines erupted through the castle, which shook to its very foundations, each vine preceded by green flame.

Marluxia and Naminé were forced apart by a massive root pushing its way between them, as they and the other Organization members were aware of a mad female cackling that seemed to echo all around them.

Riku frowned, confused, when Kairi’s wayfinder, that he had been using to light his way in this dark room, suddenly turned into something more like a paopu fruit made of glass.

It instantly changed back when he concentrated on it, but it was still odd.

He turned around, anticipating more Heartless to rise up around him, already regretting even more of his decisions. As bad as this Wonderland place was, he could (usually, when a flower didn’t blind him with sap or poison or magic) *see* in the place. He didn’t understand why he had to use cards for some rooms but not others in this Castle, but he already decided that this 'Bottomless Darkness' card was the worst of the lot.

Instead of a Heartless, however, there was a girl, in one of those black coats like Vexen had worn. He was struck by how similar she looked to Kairi, with the same face, and those same indigo, blue-purple eyes. Aside from the blonde hair, and how pale she looked, he could have mistaken her for Kairi’s twin. "Who are you?” he asked the girl cautiously.

The girl tilted her head, her face blank and expressionless, until suddenly she grinned, wider and wider, and then *far* too wide, her mouth splitting until he could see a... Was that a *zipper* at the end of it!??

Her skin mottled and turned gray and the body morphed and twisted, until standing before him was a strange, wiggling jumpsuit like thing, with a flat triangular head, and a mouth with way too many
teeth in it.

Riku decided then that he hated this fucking castle and and every fucking thing about it.

Then a thorny root burst through the nearest door to room and took out a chunk of wall, and even if it was the same strange pink room as the first room in this world, he decided it still had to be better than Bottomless fucking Darkness.

More of the weird white jumpsuits were there, fighting with Heartless, and wiggling as if panicked, which Riku honestly didn't know how to respond to at this point.

Riku blinked, as he heard Maleficent's cackle, familiar as it was, even if it sounded like it was several floors away, confirmed by where she seemed to be by smell.

Did. Did she actually come back to life?

Kairi and Sora looked around, bumping into each other, shot each other an angry look, then both deflated and sighed.

"Sorry," they both said, then froze.

"You go first," Kairi said.

Sora shook his head. "No, you."

Kairi sighed.

Finally, Sora gave in first. "How do you remember that too?" he asked. "I know it was just me and her."

Kairi shook her head. "And I know it was me instead."

Sora frowned, then crossed his arms in thought. "Maybe it happened twice?" he suggested.

Kairi looked skeptical about that suggestion. "Really? But, like, how if we were all so young at the time. Meteor showers don't happen that often on the islands."

Sora blinked. "Wait a minute!" he said, "it had to have been mine!" he said.

Kairi looked at him, hurt and cautious.

Sora just nodded. "Yep, the only meteor shower I remember was when you a arrived."

Kairi blinked at that, and shook her head. "No, I remember another one, and..." She suddenly was startled by realization. "Wait, was it a meteor shower or a thunderstorm."
Sora shook his head, startled by how much reaching she was doing. "C'mon Kairi, it was definitely a... huh!? Wait, I remember that now too! What gives!"

"There y'all are!"

"We were worried sick!"

Donald and Goofy came running in, and Sora and Kairi looked at them, then each other, and sighed. "We're sorry," Kairi said.

"We shouldn't have just gone on ahead like that," Sora added.

"This is obviously a trap," Donald said, "We have to—"

"Hey fellas! Look!"

"Huh? Goofy! Wait!"

They followed Goofy when he ran off, arriving finally in front of a huge castle with pipes and gears everywhere.

They all were shocked by how familiar it was.

"See!? I was right! This is the contraption castle, a-hyuck!"

They all blinked, and frowned. "Didn't it look different?" Donald pointed out.

Kairi frowned, and put her head to her brow. Her skull was pounding right now. "Something's—"

"BELLE!"

They looked, and suddenly noticed two figures with them in front of the castle's large front gates, a woman in a poofy yellow ballgown, and a hairy horned monster in a purple cape approaching her, even as she avoided him.

"I don't understand," the Beast said, "I came here to rescue you."

The woman, Belle, shook her head. "Beast, I did not..." she trailed off, then turned, and looked right at Kairi. "Kairi?"

"Belle?" Kairi asked back, she couldn't quite remember, but she felt—

"GRARGH!"

They jumped at the noise, and as they watched, the horned beast disappeared into light, and a shining orb appeared where his chest had been, and was pulled by a green orb on a long staff, held by a pale green-skinned woman in dark robes and with curled horns.

"How curious," she said.

"Maleficent!" Belle shouted, and Maleficent smiled.

"Thank you," she said warmly. And suddenly, she somehow, solidified in a way that couldn't entirely be described. "My name spoken aloud and remembered by a heart of light opposed to my own, just what I needed to hear."
"And of course, you three, no, four? My, what a surprise after all," she said, turning towards Kairi and the others, before, tapping her staff on the ground, and with a flash of green flame and a wave of force, they were all knocked backward.

"Stop! Don't come any closer to them!"

Maleficent turned, and visibly paused when she turned towards Belle, the red and black of the Keyblade of Heart in hand, pointed towards her.

Maleficent hummed, and took a step back from the fallen heroes, but took note at the way Kairi clutched at her chest while she struggled to her feet, the flowers and vines of Destiny's Embrace in hand.

Maleficent raised her staff, and the shining light she had extracted from the Beast came to rest on top of the jewel, and she lifted and turned it to inspect it. "What a curious script we have been given, is it not, princess Belle?"

Belle blinked and lowered the keyblade at that. "Script? What do you mean?"

Maleficent scoffed. "Surely you've noticed? Or, is your 'love' as much of a joke as I believed?"

Belle blinked. "Love? What are you... oh" she seemed to realize, her hand coming to touch her own body. "I'm not real," she seemed to realize.

"You most certainly are," Maleficent said, "Or rather, your heart is, it's merely your body in this world which lacks in substance."

Belle shook her head. "Then how do I know things, why do I feel drawn to say and do things the real Belle would—"

"This Castle," Maleficent said, before frowning and tapping her staff on the ground again, causing the bricks and pipes of the gate to vanish, revealing only white walls and a perfectly cubical room instead, decorated only with marble pedestals engraved with roses.

"This Castle," she repeated, with added emphasis. "It draws forth memories of others to recreate the people in them, usually to teach a lesson or some other such nonsense."

Maleficent smiled and raised a hand to her breast. "I, however, know sorceries to restore oneself to life through the light and memory of others, while you, dear, seem to have been granted your original heart simply by proximity."

Belle blinked, and then looked down at the keyblade in her grip, lifting it to see it better as she held it. "Oh."

"These roles we were granted, they are most curious, are they not? 'My dark magic requires hearts of utmost beauty'," she recited, before shaking her head. "What a fascinating idea, is it not? But most curious of all is the idea that it is your love for the Beast that makes your heart beautiful, when we can both plainly see that you truly don't love him at all! Certainly not in that way."

"Enough," Belle said.

"Oh, am I wrong?" Maleficent asked. "As I understand it, if you loved him he would no longer be a Beast at all! Not that those fools could possibly know it, of course."

"Huh?" Sora said dumbly.
"I must give points for originality," Maleficent finally said as she shook her head. "But this entire narrative is deeply flawed. What use does a fae such as I possibly have for the 'beauty' of humans?"

"I thought you were a witch," Donald asked.

Maleficent raised an eyebrow, and one couldn't deny how immaculate those brows were, or how well they conveyed scepticism. "Witch is a title, and a discipline of study, hardly a species. You of all people should know that, avian."

"Maleficent!" Sora yelled. "Are you the one who messed with Riku's heart, and made him mad at us?"

Maleficent actually blinked at this. "Riku?" she asked. "Last I saw to him he was in this castle's basement, in fact, I can sense that he is still there, working his way up, so utterly besotted with the both of you that he is."

Kairi blushed, and Sora stage whispered "What does besotted mean" but she ignored him and yelled instead. "Don't lie! We just saw Riku earlier!"

"I did not lie, child," Maleficent said pityingly. "Perhaps the Riku you saw twas the lie instead."

"What do you mean?" Sora asked.

"Bear it in mind," she said cryptically. "Now, as for the rest of you..." she smiled, suddenly, and tapped her staff on the ground again. They were once more in front of the gates, but this time surrounded by Heartless, and Kairi gasped when she saw a little girl, also surrounded.

"Naminé!" Kairi and Sora cried, because of course the hair of the little girl clutching (flowers? No, of course not) a sketchpad to herself was blonde, not blue, and certainly not red.

"Oh?" Maleficent asked with interest. "Is that what you think this is a memory of? Although, speaking of disappointing narratives..."

Maleficent vanished into green flames, as the group launched themselves at the Heartless.

"Ah, Lauriam and Elrena, how pleasant to see you again, seems like it was only yesterday. Tell me, is dearest Strelitzia here as well?"

Green flames rose, and there in the Organization's sanctuary within Castle Oblivion was Maleficent, smiling sincerely, her face and posture unchanging, even when Axel and Larxene summoned their weapons and brandished them at her.

Maleficent took notice of Naminé and immediately gave her a half-bow. "You must be this castle's mistress," she said. "Where are my manners, I thank you for your hospitality to a fellow Witch, but —"
"I am lord of the castle," Marluxia said, glaring and raising his voice, and Maleficent blinked and then smiled.

"Well, that does change things." Maleficent said with a sneer. "In that case, I am here to give you notice of your eviction."

"You can't be serious," Axel said flatly.

Marluxia rubbed his gloved hand across one of the huge thorns now encircling the room, and at his touch the dead plant life bloomed, beautiful buds erupting along its surface, opening and throwing their pink color into the air.

"Before we do anything else," he said, "Would you mind telling us how you know our names, seeing as we have never met?"

"And who's Strelitzia?" Larxene asked, prompting little to no reaction on Marluxia's part.

"...Fascinating indeed," Maleficent said, before turning once more to Naminé. "I take it you are responsible for this as well?"


"That is a conundrum," Maleficent said. "No matter, dear, I am sure you have done the best you could, I shall simply have to teach you to do better once I have dealt with these—"

"Teach me?" Naminé said.

"Dealt with?" Marluxia said.

"I'm lost," Axel said, "Could we back up for a bit?"

"Why bother, she won't be here for much longer!" Larxene raised her knives, and Maleficent simply stared unimpressed.

"Where is your keyblade?" she asked.

"My what?"

"Her what?!"

"Oh, now this all seems hardly worth the effort," Maleficent muttered, before raising her staff again, causing more thorns to appear in the room, between her and the others.

"My business here requires a chosen of the key, before anything else," she said. "If you can find the time to think of things besides paltry adolescent farce, I shall await you in the Chamber itself, child." She lifted her staff, and one of the vines shot forward, knocking Larxene unconscious as she slammed against the wall, while Maleficent herself vanished once more into flames.

"...The Chamber? Of Repose?" Naminé said aloud.

Axel and Marluxia glanced at each other, then looked away, at the unconscious Larxene.

"...So, are you gonna wake her, or?"
Kairi slashed through a heartless as it came to her, trying to keep the little Naminé behind her.

She had no idea how or why Naminé was here, now, but she had to protect her, no matter what.

She blinked, as the moment she thought this, she realized that the presence was gone, and when she looked around there was little Naminé running towards the Castle Gates.

"Wait!" Kairi cried, only for a pair of wiggling husks to get in her way. One looked like an upside-down flower wielding a scythe, with a hood and shoulder-pads. The other had floppy cow-like ears, and long sleeves covering kunai, and crossguards over the shins that extended into long golden feet.

"Reapers and Ninjas!" Jiminy cried, scribling furiously.

"Not a good time!" Sora shouted, jumping at the 'Reaper' and pushed away by a swing of that scythe. The 'ninja' meanwhile lunged at Kairi lightning-quick, but was held off by Belle, coming in to intercept.

Kairi was actually impressed that the ballgown hadn't gotten in her way, honestly.

"Kairi!" Belle shouted, and Kairi looked at her outstretched hand, and grabbed for it.

In an instant it was like they were surrounded, side-by-side with five other women and girls, and for a moment Kairi felt her heart ache and pound, like she should know them, and like she was sick that she didn't, but all their eyes were closed, and they were unmoving and ghostly, until the littlest, a blonde girl in a blue and white dress opened her eyes looked at Kairi and smiled.

"Together!" Belle announced, and Kairi felt the light, and pushed everything she had into it, and in a flash, all the Heartless and the strange husks were gone.

Kairi stood dazed for a moment, when suddenly Belle grabbed her by the arm. "This way!" she said, before Kairi was pulled along, the others trailing after her through the winding, checkerboard tiled corridors inside the castle, until they arrived at a large library.

"Why'd we come here," Sora wondered, and Belle blushed at that.

"Well, I didn't get a chance to read all of the books here before you closed the door," Belle said, and Sora groaned.

"But we have to find Naminé!" he said, and Kairi was inclined to agree with him, if her head wasn't killing her right now.

"Isn't that her right there?" Goofy pointed towards where the small child form of Naminé was, heading towards the window, where an old woman with her hair in a bun was sitting.

Kairi felt her stomach clench at the sight of the old woman. She couldn't remember her, or anything about her, but just looking at her hurt.
Sora frowned, approaching Kairi to stand beside her, and look at the woman, his head tilted to the side in confusion. "Isn't that... Kai-your- ...Naminé's grandmother?" he asked, struggling like something sour was in his mouth, or like his own words were fighting against him.

Kairi frowned and clutched her head, as the grandmother told a story.

"Long ago, people lived in peace, bathed in the warmth of light..."

Riku was upside down, walking on thin air above a forest, fighting a. Thing, some kind of Heartless, with a stacked head and a pair of flaming drumsticks.

"Oh, hello," said a strange grinning pink and purple striped cat as it appeared in the air next to him, while he dodged a fireball.

"Oh, goodbye," the cat said when he sliced through the Heartless, making it vanish.

Riku frowned. Did he just smell seven Kairis for a second there?

And why did he still smell two?

No, wait, 3!? Also instead of 7 earlier it was 8, maybe? With 7 in one place and the 8th in another?

Riku frowned, expecting to be released from this world when he defeated the Heartless, but no dice.

...There was a pack of cards, though, walking around on legs and holding weapons in hands, and Riku was curious enough that he wanted to see what the hell was up with that.

"Maleficent has returned," Lexaeus rumbled.

"Really?" Zexion asked. "What gave it away?" he asked, leaning against a large thorn.

"We must act, now," Lexaeus insisted. "If she still seeks the hearts of light, then they can be used to lure her, and if she does not, they are the best weapon against her."
Zexion raised a brow. "You suggest we bring Kairi to bear in this matter?"

"Marluxia has no interest in her," Lexaeus said.

"Nor, I must confess, do I," said Zexion, his expression behind his hair unusually skeptical of his companion. "What are you scheming, Lexaeus?"

"It might be nice for you to see her again," Lexaeus finally said, and Zexion couldn't help the incredulity from his voice.

"It's been 9 years," Zexion said. "Are you trying to set me up on a play-date!?"

Lexaeus shot him a Look, and Zexion scoffed.

"Oh, please," he finally said.

Lexaeus continued to stare at him, judging.

"I hardly think I'm in line for the succession anymore regardless," Zexion argued, "Even if the monarchy doesn't end up abolished."

Lexaeus made no response to this.

"Would you really condemn her to a lifetime with a heartless wretch like ourselves?"

"I've condemned better people to worse fates," Lexaeus said, and Zexion was surprised at the admission.

"Why, in the world, do you think it's a good idea in the first place?" Zexion finally asked.

Lexaeus shook his head. "You've always needed friends your own age, and you always used to talk about how 'useful' she was; now more than ever I should think."

"The Organization has no need for the seven lights yet," Zexion said.

Lexaeus seemed surprised when he said this. "Yet?" he repeated.

...Zexion wasn't sure why he'd said that either.

"I thought our plan was for Riku," he finally said, hoping to salvage some of this conversation.

"The plan has changed, and must change, to account for the new variable on the board," Lexaeus said firmly. "Larxene, the Replica and Vexen are all too unstable to entrust something as valuable as the princess to their protection."

Zexion frowned. "Are we protecting her or weaponizing her," he asked incredulously.

Lexaeus actually smirked at this, suddenly making Zexion slightly uneasy. "I never said we couldn't take two birds with one stone." he giant man said.
Goofy frowned, saw how peaceful things finally were when Naminé's grandma stopped speaking, with both little girl and old woman walking away to elsewhere in the castle, considered leaving things where they were when he saw Sora and Kairi cuddled up together, not fighting, and Belle reading more.

Even Donald seemed happy and content.

But none of this made any sense whatsoever.

"Whose memory is this?" he asked, making them all look at him.

"You kids knew Naminé on your islands, right?" Sora and Kairi looked at each other then nodded back at him.

"Well then, how is this a memory of Naminé in Hollow Bastion?" he asked.

Belle frowned, and looked up from her book. "Kairi, you're from Hollow Bastion originally, aren't you?"

Kairi blinked. "I am!?"

Belle seemed surprised. "I thought that was what you told me before," she said, closing the book and setting it down.

Sora frowned. "Did you both come from the same place?" he thought aloud. "Does that mean this is your memory? But then, where are you in all this?"

Kairi grunted and held her head. "I don't knooooow" she whined.

Sora frowned. "But, I remember that Naminé went away to somewhere else, but not her being from somewhere. How did she get to the islands, if I what I remember is that she was always there?"

Donald cleared his throat. It sounded ridiculous. "What about the thing Maleficent said, about the Riku we saw being a lie, and the real Riku being here somewhere else?"

Belle raised an eyebrow. "Are you really going to trust what Maleficent said?"

Donald shot her a look. "You haven't been here the whole time, we don't exactly have a lot to go on," he said, and Belle conceded the point.

"Well," Belle said, getting up and looking around the library, "I know I saw some sort of book here about the Heart and memory, and I never got a chance to read it."

Jiminy frowned. "But, if this castle is made of memories, and we didn't read the book, would it still..."

The keyblade of heart flashed in Belle's hand, and the books around them all flashed back in response.

"...I don't know what that means."
Naminé wasn't sure when or how Marluxia had pressed her against the wall by the throat, but it was honestly a refreshing change of pace, considering Larxene was usually the one that got physical.

...That was a messed up thing to think.

"Let go of her," Axel said, and Naminé didn't know if she wanted to laugh or cry at the idea that he thought that would work. For being one of the only two (possibly three) friends she had, Axel was really bad at it.

"The Superior gave me express orders, in person, on what to do if she turns on us and joins forces with the keybearers," Marluxia said. "Which is exactly what she's done. She is to be broken, body, mind and soul, never to be used for their purposes."

Naminé blinked, because, somehow, instinctively, with no confirmation, she knew that he'd just told the truth.

"I didn't do anything," she finally choked out, and gasped in relief when he let go of her.

"They're figuring it out," he pointed to the crystal, ignoring her gasping. "Did you make that card for them or not?"

"...I started to make it," she finally said, "But the moment I started touching some of the memories and pulling them into the card, Kairi's other hearts reacted and pushed me out."

"Hmph," Marluxia said. "And what about Maleficent?"

Naminé stayed on the floor. "Well, Riku's somewhere in the castle," she said.

"He's also completely irrelevant," Marluxia said, his eyes flashing dangerously. "You are not to pay attention to him."

"I haven't been," she said, placing careful, perhaps exaggerated emphasis on the personal pronoun, as she fought the smirk that tried to appear on her face at the thought of a Dusk, clad in a black coat, features shifted by Naminé's powers into an identical copy of her own, the way she admired herself in the mirror, tossing Naminé's hair and speaking with Naminé's voice, and wielding Naminé's powers as her own, while in return Naminé got to see through the Dusk's eyes and hear through her ears.

(An effective method of repressing the smirk was reminding herself just how grateful Naminé had been when even the power transfer and replication had worked, because the thought of leaving an innocent Dusk alone and powerless with Darkness In Zero was just too much to bear)

"But," she continued, "I did notice that memories of Maleficent were..." She paused to consider how to phrase it, then gave up. "Nearby?" she hazarded.
"I knew Kairi had memories of Maleficent, as did Sora, and they needed a villain, so I grabbed those. For allies all they had in that world was the Beast, seeing as they already had encounters with Leonhart on the first floor, and for the Beast, of course, there was the princess Belle, but then..." Naminé shook her head. "The Belle memories reacted, and then..." Naminé shrugged helplessly.

"Sounds over-complicated to me," Larxene finally muttered, before jamming a thumb at the crystal. "What about that story, you know what's up with that?"

Naminé shrugged helplessly. "You'd know as much as I would," she said, More, honestly, considering you were there.

"What's the verdict, you gonna ice her boss?" Axel asked, and she blinked, and finally looked up from the floor, to the green eyes of someone who she'd considered a friend.

There was an apologetic look there, but not apologetic enough.

Marluxia kicked her, sending her skidding across the floor to her sketchpad, part of her wondering why the replica wasn't here, most of her grateful that he wasn't, that he wasn't getting himself hurt, by them or herself.

"Get back to work," Marluxia said, and like a useful asset, Naminé did as she was told.

Kairi was honestly surprised that she was the one having trouble with reading of all things.

She wasn't the best student in their friend group, that was always Riku, who had to be better than literally everyone at literally everything, but unlike Sora she didn't literally fall asleep in class either.

But reading these books, about darkness and light and the workings of the heart and memory, many or most of them signed 'Ansem' with a handful under additional co-publishers names like 'Even' or 'Aeleus' (for some reason seeing the ones published under 'Lenzo' made her smile, while the single volume published 'Lea' had made her burst out laughing for some reason, she didn't even know who that was) was proving to be unnerving, like she'd heard some of this before under—

She was in a cage, people were screaming, they kept poking and prodding her, and there was another girl with her, a strange, sad smile on her face, she snapped back to herself, tears in her eyes, shaking, sobbing and gasping for breath as Belle and Sora hugged her, soothed her, speaking softly, trying to get her to calm down, and stop the shaking, as she finally breathed for the first time and the world shook and spun.

...Under less pleasant circumstances, she finished the thought, dissociating.
"Do you want to talk about it," Sora whispered finally, his eyes shining bright, as always so kind, and she grabbed him and kissed him on the cheek, and the mouth, her necklace shining bright like it had then—

"Sorry!" she said, pulling back and pushing him away like she'd been burned. "Sorry! I should have asked, that was inappropriate and—"

"It's fine!" Sora stammered, "Fine! I shouldn't have gotten so close, it—"

"It's not your fault!" she insisted, and then buried her face in her hands, wanting to curl up and disappear.

Belle hovered at her side still, then kissed her on the crown, like a mom (her mom? Did Kairi have a mom?) would do. "We're here if you need us," she finally said softly, then lifted that strange and awful and strangely awful keyblade and placing it in Kairi's hand, her own fingers wrapped around Kairi's, and Kairi relaxed at the feel of 6 other pairs of arms and hands around her, supporting her, holding her up.

She nodded. "I'm fine," she said, as her breathing finally evened out, and she gratefully took a cup of water from Goofy when he brought it over.

"Thanks," she said, and frowned when Goofy took it away from her after one sip.

"Careful, now," he said, "Don't overdo it."

She nodded, and started sipping slowly, feeling her racing heart slow down.

Jiminy was hopping up and down on an open book. "Did we find anything?"

Belle frowned. "I could have sworn it was here," she said, putting a book back on a book shelf.

A book shelf which immediately swung open, revealing a hole in a wall, leading into a massive chamber with containers covering the walls, and in front of them a small platform, with a hole in the middle, and a spiral ramp leading down in the depths.

Kairi froze, her breath caught in her throat. "Put it back put it back putitbackputit—"

Suddenly, Naminé appeared, their age (or, older, even?) instead of the small child they'd seen in this world, and ran past them, down the spiral.

Sora reached for Naminé, but lowered his arm and turned away when he glanced and saw the terror in Kairi's eyes.

Kairi gulped, shaking her head back and forth, when Sora came in front of her, calmly, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"We can turn back," he said.
The organization members froze what they were doing.

Naminé dropped a crayon, and it rolled across the floor.

She could feel Marluxia and Larxene bearing down on her, and raised her head and took a breath, resolute, prepared for, she believed, the inevitable end.

Sora smiled at Kairi encouragingly. "We'll find the real Riku in the basement and get out of here, just the three of us," he said, smiling encouragingly. "That okay with you?"

Kairi felt eyes on her, from Jiminy and Goofy and Donald and Belle, waiting for her decision.

She forced her breathing to stay calm, and finally said, despite everything in her telling her to say otherwise, "No."

Sora looked at her, and she just nodded. "Whatever's going on, whatever's wrong with our memories," she said, trying to think this through rationally. "Naminé will know what the truth is," she finally decided.

"But," Donald said.


"We can't let those black coats keep hurting her, can we?" she asked, and Donald and Goofy looked at each other and winced. They'd seen those marks too, during the fight with Larxene.

Whatever else was going on, a child was a child.

"I'll help you as far as I can in this body," Belle said.

"Mmhmm!" the group nodded and agreed.

Then they left, running through the secret passageway and then down through the spiral to the depths.

There had been one last book they hadn't got to, one pristine and unopened, like it was brand new, with no dust or wear or tear whatsoever.

The book's title read, "Been Through Many Forms and Semblances Since, But It's Still You Underneath It All? Had To Cast Your Old Form Away? One Weird Trick, Old Coots Hate Him!"

By Braig.

If anyone had opened it and looked past the front cover, they would discover it was actually a
hybrid physics textbook and jokebook, with nothing especially interesting aside from the Dedication, 'To MoM' and perhaps an unusual emphasis on the proofs related to quantum mechanics and parallel universes

Perhaps most relevant to this story, dear reader, was the discussion on the nature of the Observer Effect, and how, through alterations to memory and perception, hypothetically even the Realm of Light itself could be—

What's that? You want to know how that's relevant? Well, as I once told my dear Luxu:

You'll see.

The end never came.

She opened her eyes, and instead saw her captors/superiors staring at the crystal.

She blinked.

Kairi leaned on Sora as they walked down the long hallway, trying not to look at the doors around them, at the chains and locks and barred windows, instead focusing straight ahead, on the door at the end of the hall where Naminé had gone.

They made their way to the door at the end, and were knocked back when it exploded outwards, doors flying off their hinges.

Standing there was a suit of blue and purple armor, visibly feminine (which, didn't seem especially practical to Donald and Goofy, with the potential damage to a sternum, but they had known keyblade wielders enough to ignore the eccentricities involved) and with a keyblade in hand, teeth shaped like a crown.

"What's with all the keyblades lately," Sora groaned.

The armored woman surged forward wrapped in a barrier, Sora and Kairi's strikes rebounding uselessly off of it, while Donald just groaned, because of course they just rushed in.
"Kairi!" Belle shouted.

"Nope," Donald said, pulling her back with him and Goofy.

"But they're—"

"Listen, toots," Donald began.

Belle raised an eyebrow archly. "Toots?!" she said, too shocked for outrage.

"Donald," Goofy chided, and the Court Magician sighed. He deserved that, he recognized.

"Sorry, Belle," he tried again. "I don't suppose you've read anything about strategy?"

"Not much," Belle admitted, looking at the duck warily, while in the background Kairi blasted the armor with a stream of water, met by a fireball that evaporated into a massive cloud of steam, which the armor burst through followed by another fireball, which was intercepted by Sora.

Donald sighed again at her admission. "Well then, plan b," he muttered.

"Good thinkin', a-hyuck! Plan B!"

"Plan B?"

"GOOFY! NOW!"

"What? Hey, put me DOWN! AAAAAAEEE!!"

The armored figure paused what it was doing, and turned to look just in time when Belle was thrown at it.

Belle swung the keyblade and clashed it against the armor's and was unsurprised when she was effortlessly tossed aside, right onto Sora and Kairi.

"Did 'plan B' stand for 'Plan Belle'?" she wondered aloud in a daze.

Sora rushed towards the keyblader and then kicked at her, catching her off guard, and then slammed his own key down on her helmet, cracking it, and revealing Naminé's blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

She raised a barrier around herself and sent him flying back.

Kairi rushed forward and slashed downward but her strike was met with a parry before Naminé brought her keyblade forward in a spin, the blade floating in the air in front of her hand as she twirled and pirouetted slapping against Kairi's guard and cutting against her exposed hair and extremities.

Then she bent her leg backwards, arched her back and touched the back of her head with it, spinning on her other foot like she was on ice, making Sora blush slightly.

"SORA!" Kairi shouted, desperately trying to block the magic.

"Sorry!" he said, embarrassed at the lapse.

He charged forward, slapping aside a fireball, a shard or ice, and a ball of lightning, even as the latter surprised him. He grabbed Kairi by the hand, pulling her to her feet and off the floor, and
"Raging Storm!" Sora said, tornados of flame erupting around him, as he floated in the air, and was shocked when the memory Naminé mimicked him exactly.

The two collided, the flames coming together into a single pillar, a massive wave of heat scorching at them all around.

"Sora!" Kairi cried, and rushed forward only for Belle and Donald to pull her back.

"We have to take care of ourselves first!" Donald urged. "Wind!" he cried raising his staff, fighting the firey burning air with a blast of his own wind magic.

"Freeze!" Belle said, lifting the keyblade in her hand, cooling the air and sending flurries of ice and cold through it.

Kairi wiped her eyes and touched Destiny's Embrace to the other keyblade and the staff. "Water!" she cast, sending moisture into the air, hoping to help douse the flame and make it harder to find fuel.

The two windstorms of magic beat at each other, before there was a flash of light and Kairi let out an "oof" as something crashed into her.

She groaned and sat up, and saw that the armored Naminé was still there, and what had crashed into her was Sora, reddened, and maybe he would blister later, she worried, but otherwise mostly unharmed.

The armored Naminé came towards them, and she put Sora down and stepped forward, own keyblade at the ready.

Naminé moved and Kairi met her in kind, both disappearing and reappearing, and meeting with a clang! of blade-on-blade, before they vanished again, and this time Kairi was able to push the other girl (and older, somehow? She was taller and her chest was bigger and focus dangit) back.

Naminé disappeared one more time and this time Kairi simply spun around and put the momentum from the spin into her blow as she cut downwards, straight through where Naminé appeared behind her.

Naminé smiled, mysteriously and sadly, and then she vanished, hair turning blue and the armor falling off her body as it too disappeared.

Kairi panted, and then collapsed, sitting on the ground, before she scooted closer to Sora. She didn't know why, but seeing Naminé... seeing that woman, with the blue hair, and how sad she looked...

She had to tell the truth.

"I love You," she finally said, and when he blushed and opened his mouth she shook her head, firmly.

"No," she insisted. Somehow, she knew that that woman, who looked so sad, had lost the people most important to her, had lost the chance to be with them, and Kairi refused to let that be her.

"Communication is the most important step," Donald whispered, before dragging Belle and Goofy away, towards the shining door back to Castle Oblivion at the end of the hall.
"I love you and Riku and— I love both of you more than anything else in the world," she told the boy in front of her, and he blushed intensely at that.

"But who— I mean—"

Kairi shook her head again. "Promise me, that whatever happens, whoever else we meet, whoever else we love, that the three of us will always be one."

Sora swallowed, and nodded. "The three of us will always be tog—"

Kairi shook her head, no. "The three of us will always be one," she insisted.

Sora gulped. "Don't we have to ask Riku what he thinks first?"

Kairi nodded vigorously. "Of course," she said, determined, "And part of the promise is that we will. That we'll always be there, always talk to each other, ask each other how we feel, what's comfortable, what we want, always find each other, always come back, always..." she shook her head and sighed.

"We'll share a paopu," Sora said, surprising her, and making her blush and tears well up in her eyes. "All three of us. And then, if the Islands won't let the three of us be together... We'll find a world that will."

Kairi nodded. "And, no matter what... Even if someone else comes along, whether it's Naminé or anyone else: We don't leave each other behind."

Sora nodded. "Nobody gets left behind, I promise," he said, extending his pinky finger.

Kairi, meanwhile, had spat into her hand, and then blushed when she saw what Sora was doing.

Their eyes met, and they came to decision, and leaned towards each other.

While the kids talked, Donald, Goofy and Belle (how old was Belle?) leaned on the walls closer to the floor exit.

"Thanks for the help," Donald said, "And sorry for the—"

Belle shook her head. "I only wish that I could go with you further, but this body..."

Goofy frowned, looking back. "Are you sure that we should be..."

Donald raised his staff and silently cast a magnet spell, pulling Jiminy towards him and away from his attempts to interrupt the couple (a side of a triad, Donald knew, somehow, deep down) of friends (not more or less, but friends and also). When Jiminy glared at him, Donald cast Silence on the cricket.

"Don't make me use Mini," Donald warned.

He glanced out of the corner of his eye and decided, okay, maybe it was possible to go a little too far, and he had to speak up. "Hands where I can see 'em, and I'm warning ya that I can't get you any precautions you might need, and the last thing we need to deal with right now is a clutch of eggs."

"DONALD!?" came one embarrassed squeak.
"Donald on my god!" came the other.

"Just keep the hands above the belt, you're mammals, you can still have fun up there," he said, earning even more of a reaction. Kids these days, he swore, when he was their age, if it was him and Panchito, or him and José, or him and Daisy, or him and Panchito and José, or him and Panchito and José and Daisy, and Scrooge came in...

...Okay, actually, nevermind, he could see where they were coming from, that reaction was totally fair.

"WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT!?"

"UGH!"

...He considered putting up a privacy screen, but he was still, like, right was the thing. They were still, 14, he thought it was?? Exploring yourself and your identity was one thing, and kissing someone you loved was always nice, but...

"...Humans can't get eggs from chest stuff, can they?" he asked, he thought they couldn't, but. "I mean, ones that'll hatch—"

"Fine! We're comin— I MEAN— THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!"

Donald sighed. "You get to give them the condom speech," he finally told Goofy. "When we get somewhere where we can get them."

Goofy didn't say anything. Jiminy hopped up in down and silent fury.

Belle just frowned, as she held one hand to her neck, feeling for her pulse like some of those books indicated, while in the other she still held the Keyblade of Heart. Her breathing was faster than usual and her pupils were dilated.

"...I'm starting to think deciding to reforge this was a terrible idea," she finally said.

Maleficent scowled, then relaxed, forcing herself back to neutrality.

It may have only been a matter of time until her thorns had pierced every room in this castle, isolating and entrapping the so-called "Chamber of Waking" as it moved and shifted within the labyrinth, but she was still getting impatient.

Ventus was here. She could feel it, through the power of Sleep.

She sighed, and thought of the last time she had encountered a sleeping pure heart.

"The princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty, beloved by all who know her."
She could admit to herself when she made a mistake.

Not that she ever did, of course.

She wondered, if, perhaps, this time, it would be a princess kissing a prince that would undo the curse.

Or, perhaps, two princes kissing. Wouldn't that put Stefan's court into a shock?

Or, perhaps more likely, she thought, considering the black and red pulsing keyblade the girl had formed, that had nearly consigned her way to eternity, a more... barbaric method would prove necessary.

...She had taken a great risk coming here, returning so early, before her proper time. The rabble were all fairies same as herself, of roughly the same age, that had known her longer than entire kingdoms, and of course dear Diablo was practically an extension of her own self.

Whatever her connection with Riku, it simply lacked the history required, and she suspected (feared) that she would lose herself, bits and pieces of her own identity slipped away, however strong her will and heart were, and no matter how strongly she gripped her own self-image, Maleficent becoming instead the Maleficent as Riku perceived her.

Perhaps the Keyblade of Heart and precious Aurora was mitigating that, but if it was, would it truly be that much improved as a state of affairs? To be maintained by the bond formed from the only curse in her long life to have failed her?

She pushed such thoughts out of mind, there was no point dwelling on the past, or on mere possibilities.

As long as she kept focus on her goals, everything else would fall into place. It was etched.

May her heart be her guiding key.

---

Sora ran forward when they arrived in the hall, Kairi beside him. "Who are you supposed to be, a scarecrow?" He called to the gaunt, creepy-looking blonde man.

"How rude," the man said. "I am Vexen, and I here to collect a debt from you both."

Kairi blinked. "We haven't taken any loans, have we? We're, like, 14?"

Vexen groaned. "Not that, you imbecilic children! You owe me for reuniting you with your friend Riku!"
The two gasped. "You what?" Sora asked.

"You don't mean—" Kairi began.

"You made that fake Riku!?"

Vexen was actually surprised at this. "You discovered my replica!? How!?

Sora paused. "A whatica?"

Goofy raised a finger in the air to draw attention. "A replica is just a fancy word for a clone or a copy."

When he looked back at the two teens they were leaning against each other, red in the face, with far-off, dreamy, distracted, (perhaps even slightly hungry?) expressions.

"You mean," Sora said.

"Two Rikus?" Kairi said. "Sora!" she said excitedly, shaking him, "Two Rikus!"

"...You guys remember that one or both of them are jerks, right?" Donald commented.

"STOP IGNORING ME!"

The two teens shook themselves and nodded. "As h-hot as that is—" Sora started, still stammering slightly.

"OF ALL THE INDECENT—" Jiminy was silenced again by another Silence spell.

"Take us to the real Riku right now!" Kairi demanded, summoning her keyblade.

"I see no need to do that," Vexen said, summoning a icy blue shield in a flurry of snowflakes.

"After all," he said. "Why trouble you in your final moments?"

Sora ran forward, but he and Kairi slipped when the floor was suddenly covered in ice. Goofy, however, jumped onto his own shield and slid it across the floor, then jumped when he was right in front of Vexen, slamming the two shields in a mighty crash, causing the blue shield to crack and then simply break.

"Wait, what!?" Vexen cried at his suddenly mangled and shattered weapon.

"Firaza!" Donald cast.

"GAH! THIS CANNOT BE!"

There was a sound of a portal opening, as the ice melted, and Kairi scrambled to ber feet, ready to go over to help Sora, only to gasp as the air went out of her when she was lifted by the waist by a single hand that could fit all the way around her and squeezed.

"Kairi!" Sora shouted, jumping up, and flailing uselessly on the hooded giant.

"Sssooorrrraa" she tried to get out with what little breath she had.

"If you wish to see Riku, Princess," the giant rumbled, "I am all too happy to oblige."

Vexen looked irate at the giant's presence. "Go away, Lexaeus! I have no need for—"
"I have no interest in getting you out of a fight you were losing, Vexen," Lexaeus said before, with a grunt, he bent over, bringing the hand with Kairi lower to the ground, and desperately she and Sora reached towards each other.

And neither of them noticed the way Lexaeus's other hand cocked back so when that hand then launched into Sora's gut, sending him flying back into Vexen, Kairi's hand slipped right through Sora's.

"GAH!" Vexen cried, while Sora threw up into the man's hair and down his hood.

"There is too much at stake for your petty squabbles," the giant said. "If none of you can see that, then the Organization and the Worlds have no use for you."

"Good day," he finally added, nodding respectfully towards Goofy under his hood even as the knight charged him, before the giant and Kairi vanished in a swirl of darkness, Kairi letting out one last scream that seemed to echo in their absence.

"SORA!"

Chapter End Notes

So I completely understand if everyone hates me for the kidnapping thing because I hate me for the kidnapping thing. And I'll probably never forgive myself for it either.

I wish I could promise this is the last one, but I can't, there might or might not be one more.

None of the canon kidnappings happen, and I've always tried in my notes and outlines to give Kairi more agency even in the kidnappings, she gets out on her own, etc., but.

...The second one is in a. It's a later fic, much later, like DDD-ish, and I might be able to work around it and have it not be an outright kidnapping, because since I beat KH3 and turned into a pillar of salt over Kairi I've been glaring at my notes and outlines and trying to work around it, but.

But I've got some cool shit, or shit I think is cool, and things I want/need to have happen, for thematic or character or plot reasons. So. I needed to shuffle her out of Sora's side of the plot. Not for Sora to save or feel bad just. For Kairi to, like. Do stuff. Away from him.

...I ain't fridging her, though. If I do, somebody shoot me.

...Or, like. I mean, if she dies, which, I don't have concrete or specific plans for, at the moment, but I'm not ruling it out because I actually do like good death scenes sometimes (even if, like in Kingdom Hearts, the death gets undone) it won't just be for manpain or "motivation" for someone else, especially a male love interest. It'll have a point to her character and story. And she certainly won't be a helpless damsel.

Anyway, more about this chapter specifically, like. I have no idea if Maleficent will meet anyone in Union Cross or not (although, apparently she stuck around in the Data Enchanted Dominion which multiple keykids in the Unions go to and gets reset for
each keykid maybe) but I also don't quite care?

Like. I realized while writing that I could technically have her actually know these people, and catch them at the disadvantage, and I decided I had to do it. Maleficent potentially knowing something they don't is basically the sole reason for the Union Cross references.

...I have this weird headcanon, that like. If Radiant Garden was ever a Disney Princess story, Ienzo and Kairi would have been the prince and princess???

Like, I don't entirely know why I think that, and. I'm not quite saying I ship it either, just that. If things had continued on a certain course, without Xehanort or Xigbar or the rest of it, that's just how the story would have gone, whether fate or destiny or obligation or inevitability or whatever. And the sad/sorta maybe fucked up thing is that both of them are probably better off and/or happier the way things actually happened instead.

I like, sorta, what could have been stories like that.

Kairi's flashback panic attack is based on this fanart of KH3 and this fanart of the KH2 novel. For the Master of Masters quote I sorta copy/pasted from the first link to get that zalgo text there.

Next chapter is Twilight Town and Destiny Islands and Halloween Town, and Kairi vs. Zexion and Lexaeus, and then Lexaeus vs. Riku.

Sora vs. Vexen, Sora vs. Repliku, Sora, Donald, Goofy and Naminé vs Larxene...

It just occurs to me that the pacing is really backloaded and I have no idea how to fix it.

Shit.

We're in the endgame now for Chain of Memories.

...I dunno if that means I'll update faster or slower or not, honestly.
I think we can all agree that KH3 would have been better if Kairi broke out of the kidnapping and beat the shit out of Xemnas and Xehanort on her own right?

Or, at the very least, brainwashing her and making her a boss would be better than Fridging, wouldn't it?

...I'm just making excuses, honestly.

Anyway, for two years while picturing a certain part of the Kairi vs. Lexaeus fight, I had "Rules of Nature" from Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance in my head.

Kairi gasped for breath when she was dropped on the ground, then glared up at the two jerks in black who'd taken her.

"Is that a way to look at your rescuers?" The giant asked, pulling back his hood to reveal very... she wouldn't say ugly, but certainly strong features.

"Rescuers?" she asked, trying to convey as much sarcasm as she could, still getting her breath back.

If she could get them talking, then maybe...

She was lucky she didn't break her teeth or nose or bite her tongue when the giant slapped her across the face, nearly spinning her around. Lightly, by his standards, she was sure, judging by the muscle bulging under that coat, but she didn't see that as a reason to be grateful, he shouldn't have hit her at all.

"Don't take that tone with me, now that I've finally reunited you with your betrothed."

She blinked, and looked up, at the giant, and at the emo-haired blue eyed (yellow-eyed) man at waist-height next to him, rubbing at his brows.

"...Y-you or the twig?" she couldn't help but find herself asking, trying to mask her unease and fear with humor, it seemed to work for Sora after all.

Bringing up betrothal immediately after kidnapping was not a good sign, but she tried to focus on ignoring that and getting out of here.

The shorter man sighed. "Really, Lexaeus? That's what this is about?"

"I already told you, Zexion, that we need her to—"

"You told me excuses," Zexion snapped, petulant.

"You need her by your side far more than you do me," the giant Lexaeus rumbled, surprisingly softly. "I've let you grow up without a heart, let you use me as a crutch, but you need to stand on
"And to do that I need a bride?" Zexion shook his head. "Do you even hear yourself?"

Kairi heard it, and she was definitely uncomfortable with the word bride, but she thought she had an idea. "So, wait, are you just using me as an excuse to break up with him?" she asked.

Lexaeus growled at her, and raised an arm towards her. "Be silent," he growled, striking at her again.

Only to freeze in place when a book appeared and wrapped the arm in its pages.

She smiled to herself at the look in the golden eye behind Zexion's bangs. Nailed it.

...Note to self, don't think things like 'nailed' while still with the people talking about you like chattel, she thought.

She was probably going to need to cry about this experience later, she thought, once she was out of it.

"Well, Lexaeus? Are you just using her as an excuse to 'break up with me' as she puts it?" Zexion insisted, and he and Lexaeus glared back and forth.

"I will always do what's best for you," the giant of a man said.

"Surely, by your standards, recompletion would come first, and the blind dates could wait, couldn't they?"

"Not with this opportunity," Lexaeus said.

"What, just because she's here?" Zexion scoffed.

"Of course."

"Have you even thought this through??" Zexion asked incredulously. "Me, a literally heartless, sterile, wretched abomination that habitually uses people? With a Heart of Light? I hear she already has other paramours, and remembers nothing of the Bastion."

Talk about me like I'm not here, Kairi thought, as she looked around the room and realized, she didn't see any doors or exits.

There was no way out.

"If you were so concerned with fulfilling a long-forgotten vow, by both parties, why did it never come up with Naminé?" Zexion finally asked, making Kairi freeze.

Lexaeus growled. "Taking advantage of one so vulnerable under your charge would be inexcusable."

Zexion growled back, and it sounded feral, and for an instant, it was like a film over Kairi's eyes lifted, and she could see a door, a big one in the middle of one of the walls, but when Zexion cast out a hand it vanished.

"No one has ever or will ever take advantage of me!" Zexion snapped.

Another book appeared, and in Lexaeus other hand appeared a massive weapon, and he ripped his
trapped arm out of the book that had been binding it, shattering the book into scattered pages.

Lexaeus charged forwards, but a huge thorned vine erupted between him and Zexion, forcing the two to come halt, looking around warily as more of the vines appeared.

Kairi saw an opportunity when she saw Lexaeus begin take a step towards Zexion and hover with one foot off the ground instead of following through. She rushed forward and grabbed the giant man around his massive chest, and successfully lifted him up.

Then, making sure Zexion was behind her, Kairi let herself fall back.

"What!?

Zexion simply stared, eyes wide with shock, as Kairi suplexed Lexaeus into him. The weight of the much larger man and the force with which Kairi moved forcing the schemer on to the ground and into unconsciousness.

Kairi let go and jumped away, but frowned when the giant was still moving, pushing himself to his feet.

The door to the room was visible, and she ran towards it, but skidded to a halt when a wave of rock rushed past her and rose into an earthen wall between the door and herself.

She closed her eyes for a moment, took a breath, and opened them again when she turned, facing the giant Lexaeus, as darkness billowed from his form, the ground beneath his feet cracked, and his power itself seemed to move the air around him into a wind that blew against her face.

"You aren't going anywhere, until you fulfill your duties," the giant said implacably, standing upright and stalking towards her.

Kairi glared back. "My only 'duty' right now is kicking your butt, and getting back to my friends!" she declared.

Lexaeus started making the ground shake again, and Kairi braced herself, ready for whatever he threw at her.

Sora, Riku... I'll be with you both again soon!

Vexen glared at Sora, pushing the boy off him, then reached down to his chest and pulled a blue card from it.


"You really don't die easily, do you boy? I see you were the perfect template for my No. i after all."
"Like I'd ever lose to you freaks," Sora said, as Donald and Goofy helped him to his feet.

"Did you really not notice?" Vexen asked. "I found this in your memories, a card crafted from the other side of your heart."

Vexen tossed the card to Sora, who looked at it, then back to Vexen, before Vexen disappeared into darkness again.

"Memories, from the other side," Sora said, before looking around, then at the door ahead.

"We have to keep going," Donald said.

Sora turned and glared at the duck. "But what about Kairi!?"

Donald glared back. "She said she wanted us to keep going and get to Naminé, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but."

"'But' nothin'! We're almost at the top, and we have no idea where they even took her."

Goofy sighed and rested his hand on Sora's shoulder. "Sometimes, ya just gotta keep goin', and do the job that's in front of ya," he advised.

Sora frowned, even as the others pushed him to and then through the door.

Larxene groaned. "They've finally all lost it, spending all that time in that basement."

Marluxia glowered as he scanned the viewing crystal. "Taking one of our projects right out from under us is an unprecedentedly bold move for Zexion and Lexaeus both."

Axel nodded. "The show's over if Sora finds out about 'the other side', isn't it? He might just disappear entirely, and that'd ruin all of the Organization's plans at once."

The three paused, then turned to look at the fourth of their number, sitting in her chair and offering a sheet of paper with a sketch on it to a Dusk, who opened its maw and swallowed the paper instantly. Naminé went back to drawing, then looked up and blinked owlishly at their attention. "Mmm?" she asked, caught like a deer heartless in Gummi Ship headlights.


Naminé looked at the crystal herself. "I thought that was the plan," she finally admitted. "It's taken so much effort just to exist in the same world as Kairi, and we'll never be able to touch, skin-to-skin." Naminé actually laughed, and started shaking. "She could end me with a handshake," she managed to get out between sobs.
"Good to know," Marluxia said his eyes narrowing, "But Sora and his other side are not the same as Kairi and you. Deal with it."

Naminé shook her head. "You better hope that he passes through without catching on, I can't quite make him forget about himself. I tried it with Kairi, and as we saw last floor, it just doesn't work."

Marluxia stared at her for a moment, and she stared back. Finally, she looked away towards her sketchpad, and Marluxia turned towards Axel. "I trust you know your own duties."

Axel shook his head and adopted a surprised expression, pointing to himself as if to say 'Who, me?' "I haven't a clue, honestly, but maybe you could spell it out."

"You must eliminate the traitor," Marluxia said calmly.

Axel grinned like a cat that got the cream. "No taking that back later~" he said playfully, vanishing as a corridor appeared around him.

Sora frowned when they stopped in front of a strange mansion. "This is just weird," he muttered. "I know I've never been here, but it's starting to feel familiar anyway."

"Maybe you've been here before," Donald suggested.

"That's just it. I never have," Sora replied with certainty.

"Maybe it's like with Naminé," Goofy suggested. "You forgot other stuff, so now you remember this place."

Sora shook his head. "No, with Naminé the memories sorta just started drifting back. This town just feels really familiar, and I can't place it."

"Feeling nostalgic?"

The group glared when Vexen appeared.

"A question for you, then," Vexen said. "Which is more real to you, this town's familiarity, or your memories of Naminé?"

Sora frowned. He knew what he wanted to say, the memories seemed so real, but...

"Is neither an option?"

Vexen actually stopped at this.

Sora shook his head. "My memories of Naminé, they feel right, but they're all jumbled and don't make any sense! I remember being with her in Hollow Bastion, even if I was never there and lived
on an island my whole life. I remember Naminé disappearing the same night Kairi appeared on the island, and I also remember us all being together."

"That clone you made was obviously a trick, how do I know for sure the rest of this isn't either!" Sora demanded accusingly.

Vexen actually seemed taken aback. "I'm impressed. Oh, now I almost wish I hadn't interrupted Marluxia's little game. With a mind as keen as yours, we might even be better off than with your better half."

Sora blushed. "Wait, what do you mean by 'better half'?" he squeaked out.

Vexen rolled his eyes. "And there it is," he muttered.

"I can assure you, at any rate," he continued, "That your memories of this town are the real ones. Cast aside your memories of Naminé, such as they are, as soon as you can, or they will entrap you beyond hope of escape. Just like my Riku."

Sora glared. "I don't care if you made him or not!" he finally snapped. "You don't get to treat people like they're 'yours'! If there's one thing that I know, it's that Naminé's in trouble here! And I won't let you or anyone else hurt her anymore!"

Vexen raised an eyebrow, his eyes bugging out of his head creepily, and Sora rushed forward and bounced off the shield as it manifested.

"Sora! BLIZZAZA!"

"Donald," Goofy said, with his hands out pleadingly at the wizard. "Why?"

"BLIZZAZA BLIZZAZA BLIZZAZA!"

Vexen was glowing now, his eyes and his skull shining and transparent, and it almost seemed like the stars themselves shone through him, and as this transformation took place Vexen's shield drew ice to it, forming a sword that seemed larger than the trees themselves.

Which he brought down onto Sora's head.

"SORA!"

Sora groaned on the ground. "That's amazing," he.slurred, dazed. "You can control ice."

"Donald, maybe you should try to use your spells more, uh," Goofy frowned. "Apparition? Apparently? Apple?"

"Appropriately?" Vexen prompted.

"That's it! A-hyuck! Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Vexen said, sending ice shards at Goofy that were blocked by the knight's shield effortlessly.

"As I was sayin', you really gotta be more appropriate with your spells, Donald! Now you used fire on this guy earlier, why'd ya think ice would—"

"MEGAFLARE!"
"You can't just solve all your problems with flare spells!"

"WATCH ME!"

Goofy sighed, pulled out an Elixir, and pulled Sora up to help him drink it.

Vexen glared as his shield melted, and rushed forward to catch Donald with an icy backhand that sent the bird flying, and sent a spear of ice towards Goofy, forcing him to jump back as Sora pushed himself to his feet. When Goofy threw his shield, Vexen grinned and caught it. "Many thanks, Captain!"

He covered the new shield with ice, and brought it down towards Sora.

Sora dodged it and slashed upward for a counterattack, which Vexen raised the stolen weapon to block.

Only for Goofy to raise his hand, causing the shield to vanish and then instantly rematerialize in the knight's grip in a flash of light.

"What! NO!" Vexen cried, as Sora slapped him across the face, sending him flying back.

"Ugh!" Vexen groaned, pushing himself up bonelessly. "You ARE dangerous."

"Whatever," Sora said. "Just, let that copy of Riku go, so he can be his own person!"

---

Naminé listened to Sora's words with tears in her eyes.

She knew what she had to do now.

(The only problem was, working up the courage to do it.)

---

Vexen scoffed. "My Riku only has one fate, the same fate as us all! To fade into the darkness."
Sora growled. "Take me to that Marluxia guy you mentioned right now or—"

Before Sora could finish, a flash of red hair and burning chakrams appeared, taking a messy looking chunk out of Vexen's side.

"Gaaah?!"

"Axel!??"

Axel grinned. "Hey guys! Sorry to cut in right when we were getting to the juicy bits," he said while shaking his chakram around, bits of the darkness flowing from Vexen like a river coating the blades.

Vexen groaned in agony. "Axel..." he panted wretchedly, hunching over. "Why!?!"

Axel shrugged. "I guess you just talk too much. And I'm here to shut you up."

"No..." Vexen got out. "Don't do it!"

"We're Nobodies, Vexen" Axel said simply. "We've got noone to be, but we still are," but then Axel grinned, predatorily. "But now you get to be nothing instead of just a Nobody. You're off the hook."

"Please don't," Vexen begged.

"Now you can tell me I don't respect my elders," Axel quipped.

"I DON'T WANT TO—!"

"Goodbye."

With a snap of Axel's fingers, even with Vexen cowering with his hands raised in a futile attempt at defense, Vexen simply exploded vanishing into smoke, tongues of flame, darkness, and an ever-present smell of burning human flesh.

Sora shook his head in disbelief and shock, and fell back onto his rump.

"What the hell is wrong with you people!" he shouted, crying freely, as he jumped back to his feet and lunged at Axel.

Axel shrugged. "Wish I knew myself," he said, before vanishing back into a corridor of darkness.

Kairi stayed in her guard, even as Lexaeus swung the massive Axe-Sword down. She raised her keyblade over her head, grunting when the impact came, but she grinned.

Kairi pushed the blade back, to Lexaeus's own grunt of surprise, but she grabbed it, strained as she
pulled it, before finally lifting it and Lexaeus over her head and throwing Lexaeus at the ceiling.

She jumped onto the axe-sword mid-air, and began slicing her keyblade down at it and Lexaeus, before finally pushing up and coming down to deliver a finishing strike, amid the darkness erupting from Lexaeus's existing wounds.

Her keyblade had only scratched the surface when it was interrupted by a book materializing around it, forcing her to jump away.

She dismissed her trapped keyblade, but blinked when Destiny's Embrace didn't reappear when she called for it. Scowling, she summoned the Keyblade of Heart to her hand, at the ready, and faced Zexion, even when Lexaeus crashed to the ground behind her.

She charged towards the gray-haired man, but a book appeared in the air in front of her and suddenly Kairi was surrounded by blackness and wind and couldn't see anything else in front of her.

She raised her keyblade and poured magic into it and yelled "Light!" and she was instantly back in the room again, Zexion scowling at her. She jumped at him and slashed, and her keyblade went right through him, like he was just an illusion.

She turned and charged at a different Zexion, and found it just as much of a dead end.

She reached a third Zexion, but this time, when she attacked it, her keyblade stopped before it could even touch him.

The illusion dispersed, revealing Lexaeus with his Axe-Sword raised to block.

"Shit," Kairi swore.

She jumped back, concentrated, and fired a Pearl from the Keyblade of Heart.

And was shocked when the ball of light was followed immediately by a blast of darkness from the tip.

"What!?!" Lexaeus roared, knocking the attack aside as Kairi stared at what she just did, she could feel the darkness in the air from the blast, she could sense it, but...

"Fascinating," Zexion commented.

"Is she tainted?" Lexaeus demanded.

"...Lexaeus, if that's a statement about antiquated notions of maidenhood—"

"HER HEART!" he roared. "BY DARKNESS!"

"Oh," Zexion said, amused, dodging a slash and a swipe from Kairi. "In that case no, not in the slightest."

"Then that was..." Lexaeus trailed off.

"Ambient darkness, guided by light." Zexion said, before backing into a corner. Kairi jumped at him, and made him wince when she nicked at his side. "Lexaeus," Zexion said, worried, as Kairi continued to bear down on him, "I don't suppose that you'd..."

Lexaeus slammed his axe down sending a wave across the ground that sent Kairi flying, allowing
Zexion to recuperate and catch his breath. "Thanks," Zexion said, breathing through his nose, before he blinked and held his hand up and sniffed it, then sniffed at the air in shock. "What? Vexen's scent?"

"Vexen?" Lexaeus asked.

"His scent is gone," Zexion said. "Axel... damnit!" he yelled as Kairi charged towards him again, and he had to leap out of her path, behind Lexaeus.

He scowled as she charged towards him again, seemingly intending to go through Lexaeus in the process. Well, not if he had anything to say about it, he thought.

"Kairi!?"

Kairi stopped in her tracks and looked to an empty side of the room. "Naminé!?"

"Lexaeus now!"

Lexaeus swung Skysplitter around and into Kairi's side, sending her flying against the wall, where she crumpled to the ground.

Lexaeus panted, exhausted, and despite himself Zexion winced at the numerous injuries dotting him. It was a wonder he hadn't already faded. "Well, thoughts of marriage aside," Zexion finally joked, "You certainly did pick a valuable asset."

"No," Lexaeus said.

"I'm sorry?" Zexion replied.

Lexaeus dragged himself over to her, leaning too heavily on his weapon to do so, just to walk. "She's too strong," the giant grunted. "We need to eliminate her now before—"

"You are fickle today, Lexaeus," Zexion noted. "Something has you rattled."

Lexaeus paused. "What did you say about Vexen?" he finally asked.

Zexion sighed. "I just smelled it. Axel struck him down." Zexion shook his head. "It's deplorable. For members of the Organization to strike one another down."

"Surely Naminé has subverted Sora by now," Lexaeus said, before looking at Kairi. "Likely her as well."

"Are you suggesting Naminé's disloyalty?" Zexion asked. "Do you really think I did that poor of a job?"

"We can't chance it." Lexaeus said.

"So, what, then," Zexion asked. "Just destroy them both, just in case?"

Lexaeus seemed to consider Kairi for a long moment, then turned away. "If Marluxia seeks to control the light, we shall control the dark."

Zexion blinked. "Riku? But I thought the whole point of this was to subvert him using Kairi."

Lexaeus glanced at Kairi. "If she awakens, and if we can get her to our cause."
Zexion shrugged. "Oh, but that's where I come in," he said, his book's pages flapping and distorting in illusion.

Lexaeus looked frustrated. "A relationship should be built on—"

"There IS no relationship, Lexaeus," Zexion said with finality. "And there never will be. We're both much happier—" Lexaeus raised an eyebrow and Zexion shrugged and conceded the point. "Alright, less miserable, then, pedant. We're both better off in general with the way that things are."

Lexaeus turned, staggered, and when Zexion moved to help him Lexaeus raised a hand to stop him and pulled an Elixir, drinking it in one go.

Lexaeus looked up from his drink, and regarded Zexion for a long moment, then turned away, opening a corridor. "If you're sure."

"Nice work and good riddance," Larxene said.

"Was that just a test of Sora's strength?" Axel asked, ignoring the way Larxene leaned on him.

"Yours too," she pointed out. "We weren't sure you had it in you to take out a fellow member. Congrats, welcome to the big leagues. With the three of us, taking over the Organization will be child's play."

Naminé noticed the grin on Axel's face and ignored it, instead turning watching as the Riku Replica approached Sora in the hall outside.

"Rejoice, Naminé," Marluxia said. "Soon your burdens will be no more. That's what a hero is for, right?"

Naminé ignored him, her fingers digging into her palms.

Marluxia grabbed her by the face and turned her towards him.

"Layer Sora's memories, one by one, and now that Kairi's gone, take her out of them. Is that clear?"

Naminé glared at him.

"Those are your orders, Witch."

Naminé considered a comeback, that if he had just publicly announced his plans of betrayal, why should she betray the Organization in her own right?

But, she realized, her orders were not to eliminate traitors.

(The words "Take care of Zexion" echoed in her memory.)
All Xemnas had told her other than that was not to listen to Marluxia's threats.

He'd still told her to follow his orders.

Naminé swallowed. "I understand," she said bitterly.

Marluxia and Larxene grinned, and left the room, probably to celebrate in their own way, what they saw as victory.

Naminé took a deep breath, then stood and began to pace, tearing at her hair.

Axel raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything otherwise.

"Enough, Sora! You'll just hurt Naminé if you go any further."

Sora frowned, when he saw Riku in the hallway.

"You still want to fight?" he asked sadly. "Vexen's gone, and you're free!"

"It doesn't matter what happened to him!" Riku said vehemently. "I'm protecting Naminé from you, because that's what my heart is telling me! I made a promise to Naminé. I promised to keep her safe."

Sora frown grew deeper. "With the toy sword? And the meteor shower? And the lucky charm you don't have?"

Riku was taken aback. "What, how did you...!?!"

Sora shrugged. "I got those memories too."

Riku seemed shocked for a minute, then something seemed to occur to him because he smirked. "Well, that's the difference between us," he said, "Because I have it!" he revealed the lucky charm, a paopu fruit on a chain, to Sora's shock.

"But, Naminé..." Sora shook his head. "Right. That proves it. My memories of Naminé can't be real, and neither are yours."

"What!?!"

"Riku... You aren't the Riku from the islands. You're a copy that Vexen made." Sora explained.

"A replica!" Goofy said helpfully.

"You calling me a fake!?!" the Riku Replica shouted, suddenly angry and shocked, his eyes wide and panicked.
"Oh, not at all!" Sora said easily with a smile. "Just because you aren't my Riku doesn't mean you're not a Riku." Then Sora frowned. "Although it might get confusing, actually, maybe you should get a different name?"

"Rikuplica!" Donald suggested.

"...That seems kinda impersonal though?"

"How dare you!?!" the replica shrieked, lunging at Sora, clashing Soul Eater against Kingdom Key. "The only fake here is you! Does Naminé even matter to you?"

Sora frowned. "She's in trouble," he said. "And that definitely matters. What about you, Riku? Have you kept Larxene from hurting her anymore?"

"Larxene?! What about—"

"Larxene keeps hurting her!" Sora shouted, before headbutting Riku in the face. He knew the memories were fake, but they still felt so real, and the idea of anyone hurting Naminé made him so angry! "It's obvious for anyone to see! Are you that bad at noticing??"

"What makes you think she doesn't hurt me too!?!" Riku snapped, before freezing, and holding his hand to his face, with his mouth hanging open. "Wait, what did I... ARGH! My head?!" he started groaning and keening, shaking side to side, and held his hands to his head.

"Riku..." Sora began to approach, only to be blasted back by a wave of dark miasma.

"Agh!"

"I told you already!" the Riku shouted. "Stop trying to worm your way into my heart!"

Riku jumped forward and slashed downward, but was stopped by Goofy's shield, the knight grunting from the force of the blow as it came down.

"Shadow-flare!" Donald cast.

"Donald we just talked about this," Goofy said, as the dark orbs surrounded him and the replica. Thankfully, they still seemed to hurt the copy, as he jumped back, the masses of darkness converging on him anyway.

"Heal!" Sora cast on himself, shooting a dirty look at Donald for a moment before sighing and readying his keyblade.

"Fakes should be destroyed!" Riku snarled, and Sora just sighed.

It didn't have to be that way, he knew, somehow.
Riku shuddered when the door to the floor shut behind him.

The queen had said 'off with their heads' but in hindsight, fake or not, the mental images he was now left with when he'd obliged the nasty woman by removing her own head from her body would probably be with the boy for the rest of his life.

At least there weren't any stains on his clothes.

He approached the door and raised the last card, and was sorta surprised when he stepped through into what he assumed had been Oogie Boogie's world.

It was dark, and spooky, and somehow everything seemed darker and scarier as well, even the Heartless, or the trees, or the sound of the wind itself.

Riku looked at his reflection in the town's well, and was surprised at how, normal he looked, considering how even the Shadows seemed to have been altered, the way the light cast on them in this place making them seem more unnerving.

"Guess I'm just scary enough already," he said ruefully, smiling as he suddenly remembered the time Sora and Kairi had both gone as him for Halloween one year.

"You're not scary, Riku!"

Riku blinked, and in a flash was the image of the king, but Riku smirked.

"Looks like you could beg to differ," Riku shot back, because instead of the buckles and buttons and zippers of the King's usual outfit, he was in a suit of some kind, with a cape with a flared collar, with sharp fanged teeth.

Like some sort of Vampire Mouse.

"What? Oh, haha, oops?"

Riku shrugged. "It's fine, your majesty," Riku said, "I don't mind it."

"Gosh, Riku, I don't want ya to feel bad about yourself."

Riku grinned wolfishly. "So I'm a little spooky, if it'll get people to back off when I need em too, I can avoid a fight that way, right?"

"Well! That's one way to look at it I never considered! Thanks!"

"What?" Riku flushed, he wasn't expecting thanks for what was almost a joke. "Sorry, I meant—"

"Whoops! Sorry, gotta go! See ya real soon!"

Riku sighed when the connection with the king broke off again, Riku could still feel him, but...

Well, no use worrying about that now. Riku just had to keep moving forward.
"Gawrsh Sora, is this...?"

Sora nodded. "Yep. It's the islands."

"Whassup, Sora!"

Sora blinked, when the trio of a redheaded tall and muscular boy, a brunette girl in an overall dress, and a messy-haired blonde ran up to them.

"So, whatcha wanna do today?" the girl asked.

"Oh! Hey guys!" Sora said. He knew them, they were his friends on the island! "Am I glad to see you... Uh..."

And he forgot their names.

"'Uh' What?" the blonde boy asked.

"We got food on our faces" the tallest one joked.

"Please, Wakka," the girl teased, and Sora realized, yes! One of them was named Wakka! Only, which one? Maybe he needed to listen more to figure it out... "Only you could be dumb enough to not notice food stuck to your face."

"Hey, whoa!" the tall one responded. He must be Wakka! "That's hittin' below the belt, ya?"

"I dunno, Wakka." the blonde said, which Sora thought confirmed his assumption. "I think Selphie's on the mark." The girl was Selphie!

Wakka groaned. "Aw, not you too, Tidus!" and the blonde was Tidus!

...Sora literally just heard it but he still wasn't sure how it was pronounced? Was that a problem with his memory too?

Oh well.

"Oh, yeah...? Sora nodded his head. "You're Selphie, Wakka, and Tidus, that's who you are!"

"You hit your head?" Wakka asked.

"Yes," Donald answered for him, "But it's unrelated.

"Oh, right, these are my new friends Donald and Goofy!" Sora introduced.

"Nice to meet ya, a-hyuck!" Goofy said.

"Nice to meet you!" Selphie introduced herself. "Do you like trains?"

"I dunno, you still seem kinda spacy to me," Tidus commented.
"You thinking about HER again?" Selphie teased, and Sora frowned.

"Do you mean Naminé? Or Kairi," he asked.

Tidus didn't even seem to hear him. "That'd explain why he seems like such a zombie right now."

"Well, we can take a hint," Selphie said, grabbing the two boys. "Go get her cowboy."

Sora blushed at that, "Wait, what?"

"Again," Donald said, loudly, "Condoms."

"DONALD!"

"Oh, uh, speakin' of," Goofy said, as he pointed into the Distance where Sora saw—"

"RIKU!" he said. Before stopping and turning even redder as he whirled around and turned on Goofy.

"Wait, what do you mean speaking of!?"

"Gee, Sora," Riku finally said, "It's been a couple hours and you already managed to pick up some strays?"

Donald glowered. "I'm gonna Zettaflare him."

"Don't you dare," Goofy warned.

"Exaflare?"

"No."

"Yottaflare?"

"That one's higher than 'Zetta'!"

"Riku!" Sora finally yelled, running forward and hesitating only a moment before he gave the older boy a kiss.

It was a bad one, with their teeth clacking together, and they both fell apart clutching their foreheads where it had turned into a headbutt.

"What was that for!?!" Riku yelled, blushing. "Are you nuts?!"

"Kairi and me agree," Sora said, "That the three of us—"

The ground started rumbling. "Wait, what's happening!?!" Sora cried.

"I dunno," Riku said, recovering while still clutching his head. "But I need to go warn the others."

"The others?" Sora asked. "Wait, you're the Riku from my memories, aren't you?"

"The what?" Riku asked but shook his head. "Forget it, just, focus Sora. Your job is to take care of HER."

Sora sighed. Great, ambiguous pronouns, how helpful. "Alright, Riku, I'll get to her right away!" he said, trying to seem cheerful rather than frustrated, before running off, Donald and Goofy in tow.
Naminé stopped pacing, and turned towards the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Axel asked.

"I'm the only one who can stop this," she said calmly, not stopping.

"You did hear the part where Marluxia ordered me to eliminate traitors, right?" Axel asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Marluxia's not here," she pointed out, with a small smile of her own.

"And, besides, Lea," she said, making him suddenly stand up straight and look at her, a serious expression on his face, as she paused, heading through the open door to look at him.

"You couldn't take me down even if you tried," a second Naminé said from right next to him.

Axel jumped back, clutching his hand to his chest reflexively. He looked, and the first Naminé, the one he thought was the original and real, (the others were all wearing the Organization cloak rather than the white dress) gave him a smile and wave before disappearing finally behind the door, which closed after her.

"Roxas wants to see you again," a third Naminé said, as Axel nearly crashed into her trying to get away.

"Don't make us have to disappoint him!" a fourth Naminé chorused with the two remaining ones before all three burst into Dusks and vanished into corridors.

Axel blinked, scratched at his chest with his raised hand, and chuckled. "Neat trick, kid," he said proudly. "I'm definitely looking forward to this performance."

He froze, as the hand on his chest stilled. "...Funny that, actually," he remarked, in equal parts confusion, surprise and wonder.

"The island's breaking up!" Donald yelled out.
Sora grinned, and ran towards the large shadow rising from the ground.

Just as he was about to reach it, however, Naminé appeared, and he dashed forward even faster, panicked, to protect her.

Until he noticed that in her hands was a keyblade, with a handguard shaped like a heart, and waves along the shaft and teeth, a star in the middle of the blade's 'head' and with an orange Wayfinder made of glass and metal instead of the traditional seashells hanging from the keychain.

She leapt into the air, and destroyed the Darkside Heartless with a single blow, making him blush, partly from the show of strength, (mostly that, he wanted to believe) but also partly because, when she was in the air, with her skirt—

"Sora!" Naminé cried. "I'm here to save you!"

Sora blinked. "Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"In your dreams," Naminé teased, putting her hand on her hip, standing with her legs apart and trying to take up space in a way that was almost boyish, more like something Kairi would do.

Sora frowned. "Are you just trying to... What exactly?"

"Now that it's just the two of us," Naminé said, ("A-HEM!" "Leave 'em be, Donald," ) "We can finally—"

"You mean the three of us, right?" Sora prompted.

Naminé nodded. "Of course," she said, softly.

"Wrong again," Sora said, "Because it's four."

"What's the matter, why are you acting like this?" Naminé asked fearfully, reaching for his hand.

"No, Sora! Don't believe me!"

Sora blinked, there was another Naminé, in the same black coat as Larxene and Axel, and she seemed, sorta, fidgety?

Then, the room flashed, and they were not just in a square room of Castle Oblivion, but in one of the white hallways.

Then a third Naminé ran in, in a dress like the first one, and also with the orange keyblade shaped like waves in hand, only unlike the other two, her eyes were gold instead of blue, and her ears were pointed. And there might have been streaks of white in her hair??

She stopped when she saw them, and then leaned over her knees. She was panting, and holding her hand to her chest, like she'd just run all the way here.

"Whoops!" the Naminé in the coat said. "My bad!"

The wheezing Naminé shook her head 'no', and waved to the other two Naminés to continue.

"Oh, in that case," the coated Naminé cleared her throat, and took a more solemn tone. "I'm not in your heart, or in your memories," she said, gesturing towards the first Naminé that had defeated the Darkside. "I'm not in anyone's heart or memories, really."
Sora frowned, and crossed his arms. "But then, why did I come all this way for you? To find you?"

The first Naminé shrugged, and for a moment her hair flashed red. "It wasn't me we came here looking for, was it?" she said sadly but smartly. She nodded at Donald and Goofy. "You guys were looking for someone too, weren't you?"

Goofy frowned. "We were?"

Sora frowned. "Then why do I remember you? Why do you seem so, *important* to me?"

The cloaked Naminé sighed. "It's because I went into your memories, and—"

"I'll explain this part!"

"Riku!"

"Riku!"

"Riku!"

"Riku!"

"Rikuplica!" Donald said.

"R-Riku..." the panting Naminé gasped out.

"Your memory is a train wreck," the replica declared.

"Pot and kettle, anyone?" Donald murmured.

"Shsh" Goofy shushed him.

"You're not the one who's meant to protect Naminé: I am!"

"No, you're not," said the first Naminé.

"Naminé's meant to protect herself," the Naminé in the hood said, making the panting Naminé look up at her double.

"What?"

The copy of Riku glared, and cut through the first Naminé with Soul Eater, not even watching as it turned into Kairi, with her arms spread, and vanished into motes of light, or crystals of ice, fading into the aether.

"Riku!" Sora yelled, and ran forward, only to be kicked by the replica into Donald and Goofy, who all lay dazed on the floor.

"I said fakes should be destroyed, didn't I?" Riku said, as he approached the Naminé in the cloak. This Naminé simply stared impassively, before shrugging.

"There's no such thing as a fake," she said calmly, and wisely. "Everyone is real, and nobody is more real or complete or important than anybody else."

Riku scowled and slashed at her, making her form disperse into a wriggling gray jumpsuit.
"Gross," Riku said, while the remaining Naminé looked on in horror.

"Riku," she said, "Don't. Please, stop."

Naminé froze, and looked at the head of the jumpsuit, as it looked back at her.

"W-what!?" she stammered.

---

_Namisné froze in shock, tears falling from her eyes, as the Replica attacked one last time, and the Dusk disappeared into darkness._

"I said STOP!" she shrieked, and immediately it was like all the life went out of him, and Riku fell over, to the ground.

Sora stared, horrified. "What!?" He ran over, and tried to pick Riku up. "What did you do to him!? What did you do to Riku!?"

Naminé collapsed to the ground, tears running down her face. She looked towards the body of the Riku Replica, and then back to where the Dusk had been moments ago. A black portal appeared, and familiar bootheels stepped out.

"Broke his little heart. Well, smashed it really."

Sora gaped. "Smashed!? But then that means he's..."

Larxene raised a brow. "You do know that's just a fake, right?"

"He's more real than you," Naminé said, turning the older woman's ire in her direction.

"Ooh, ouch, despite that pretty face, that's quite a nasty tongue you've got there," Larxene said. "Might want to WATCH IT before I CUT! IT! OUT, WITCH!"
Goofy frowned. "Witch?"

Donald nodded. "I knew it."

"Yep, that's what Naminé's powers are," Larxene said, in a remarkable turn towards placidity. "She can rearrange, alter, even make new memories. Of anything she wants, even things that never happened! This whole time, you 'heroes' were being lead into a trap, by a manipulative little witch who shackles people's hearts with phony memories!"

"At least I'm not a bitch like you," Naminé hissed.

Larxene gasped and then actually chuckled at that, before she backhanded Naminé with a hand covered in electricity, sending her against the wall.

"You really PISSED ME OFF! DID YA KNOW THAT!? WE WERE SO CLOSE!"

"Naminé!" Sora cried.

"What!?" Larxene turned and glared at him. "You know the memories are fake, right? That it's all her fault, that up until five minutes ago, she was completely willing to rewrite you into nothing but a slave?"

Sora frowned. "Naminé!" he called over, and, from against the wall, where she lay with the Riku Replica, she looked up, scratched and dazed, and wobbly, like she was dizzy.

"You came down here to tell me the truth, right?"

Naminé blinked rapidly as if to clear and deblur her vision, and then nodded. "Y-yes?"

"Are you sorry you did it?"

Naminé nodded again. "I'm more sorry than anything," she said.

"You're going to try to fix it, aren't you? And not do it again?"

Naminé blinked, took in a breath, and then nodded. "I promise, I won't try to hurt anyone with my powers ever again. Only help them."

Sora grinned and nodded. "Then I promise, for real this time, that fake memories or not, Naminé, I will always keep you safe from bullies like Larxene."

"That's it!?" Larxene hollered. "A few promises and I'm sorries and 'boohoos'— *from a heartless shell that can't even feel any of it by the way*— and that's it!? Bullshit!" Larxene screeched. "I'm sick of all of it! All of this sentimental nonsense, and all of you that keep spouting it!" she shouted. "Bullshit bullshit bullshit—ARGH!"

Naminé was on her feet, glaring at Larxene, keyblade in hand, while golden chains shot past her, grazing Larxene's cheek.

"The only thing I'm sick of, is you!" She told the older woman.

Larxene threw a bolt of lightning, only for chains to wrap around the thunderbolt and make it fizzle out fractions of a hair before it actually struck Naminé.

Larxene blinked, her eyes wide, and when she threw an arm out with her knives, she ended up stabbing herself in the gut instead. "What the—OW!"
"WATERZA!" Donald cried, and Larxene's eyes widened further.

"FUCK! NO!" she cried, dodging to the side of the stream, racing around the walls and towards Donald.

Only to be grabbed in chains that swung her against one wall, then another, then towards the ceiling, before sending her towards the spell.

"NO!" Larxene cried, before smirking, then grinning manically. "WAIT! YOUR FEET ARE ALL WET!" She was right, the backwash from the spell had soaked the corridor.

"I'M TAKING YOU ALL WITH ME!" Larxene shrieked with mad glee, only for Donald to flick his wand and seal all the water into a bubble, around her, floating off the floor.

Right as Larxene unleashed her biggest electric discharge.

"NO!"

BOOM!

There was a flash, and when it was over, the water was all gone, but miraculously Larxene was there, charred and smoking and hairless, but there.

She cracked an eye open, in a way that looked and sounded literal, and glared at Naminé.

Darkness flooded off of Larxene and out of her, but she still, shaking, raised a hand, and vanished into a portal, even as Naminé chased after her, skidding to a stop when it closed.

Naminé sighed, rubbing her temples, with one hand still shaking from nerves, then forced the hand back down.

"I'll explain everything," she finally said softly, walking over to the Riku Replica and sitting down next to him, brushing a hand through his hair.

Just one more thing she had to fix, she decided.

Riku cracked his neck. Now he knew why his parents were always telling him about gambling addictions.

He sniffed the air, and glared at the eyesore taking up the hallway. "So I take it you're another of these 'Nobodies' then?"

"You've done well to make it so far," the giant man said. "But to possess your power and fear the darkness, is nothing but a waste."
"I'm not scared of it!" Riku shouted.

"It's plain to see that you are," the Nobody disagreed. "You have the potential to control it. Cast away the fear that weakens you. Unbind your heart, and take hold of the darkness within."

"And what if I say no!" Riku challenged.

The man lifted the giant weapon at his side, and darkness billowed from him. "Then you lose both light and darkness, and disappear!

Riku raised Soul Eater, trying to fight off what felt like nothing so much as pure air pressure.

"I, Lexaeus, will not yield to a frail-hearted craven! Now, stop resisting, and let the darkness in!"

Chapter End Notes

So, I had a version of this with an actual Lexaeus vs. Riku fight scene, I really did, but I just. Couldn't stand it?? Maybe I'll put it back in the edit, but for now.

...I mean, Lexaeus's ending line is pretty fucking great, am I right?

...Should that kiss with a memory Riku be tagged Sora/Riku? I feel like it shouldn't.

The main ship of this AU is SoRiKai, but like. Because of how much they're separated from each other. I decided to also tag the pairings among the three that are actually together. For the fic in question.

...Kairi and Riku aren't together yet here, but.

Well, speaking of. Next time is Sora and Naminé vs. Marluxia, and Riku vs. Zexion and Kairi, then Kairi and Riku vs. Zexion.
Chapter Summary

There is always sleep between part and meet
with our usual words on the usual street.

So let us part like we always do...
And in a world without you
I'll dream of you.

When I come to, let us meet
with our usual words on the usual street.

—Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories

Chapter Notes

The 358/2 Days fic is updating once again, so, while finally finishing this story is my main priority right now, if you want more of this series, be aware that the other fics, like, exist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I was born, about a month ago, here in Castle Oblivion."

"You're a month old?" Sora squeaked.

"Ish? Today will be about, day 40, I think," Naminé said, tapping a finger to her chin.

Donald looked her up and down. "How tall are you going to be when you're Sora's age?" he asked.

"Oh, I am Sora's age physically," Naminé said, "And when I've been alive for that many years I'll physically be about 30?"

"...How does that work?" Donald asked.

"It's a long story." Naminé said. "The important thing is that I was found here by the Organization, and trained to be a tool for them. That is, until they found out I could do this," and demonstrating, she lifted her hand and summoned her keyblade into it, in a flash of water, and floating flower petals and light.

"That's when they said I could be a 'member' for them, but even then, nothing changed. Eventually they put me right back here, and made me just a tool again," she said bitterly.

"Why don't you just leave?" Sora asked.

Naminé shrugged. "Well, because they'll destroy me if they do, or turn me into, well..."
another Naminé in a black coat appeared, and popped into a wriggling flat-headed jumpsuit. 
"...You didn't have to do that," she told the jumpsuit. The jumpsuit kept wriggling in the 
air. Naminé sighed. "This is a Dusk, it's a kind of creature that serves the Organization. They lack 
all of their memories of who they once were. The Organization turns it's members into them as 
punishment."

Sora frowned. "But if they serve the Organization... aren't you worried that they'll tell them about 
you helping us?"

Suddenly, the Dusk wrapped itself around Naminé in what was clearly a hug, and when she 
inclined her head almost as if to listen to it, the girl started blushing. "What?! But!"

"Can they talk?" Donald asked.

"Only to the Organization members and each other," Naminé, said, "But, well, to answer your 
question, they said that they're my friend?"

Sora nodded and grinned reassuringly. "Well, that's good."

"So, was what Larxene said about your powers true?" Goofy asked.

Naminé's slight smile vanished, and she nodded. "Yes," she said. "I can change people's memories, 
and yes, I was the one who changed yours, all of yours..." Naminé frowned. "Did Jiminy go with 
Kairi?"

The group blinked, patted down their pockets, then shrugged.

Naminé's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Well." She shook her head. "Anyway, it doesn't matter 
now. Sora and Kairi never knew me in their memories, because I never even existed in them."

"If you're the one who messed up our memories, can you fix them too?" Sora asked.

Naminé nodded resolutely. "Yes, but we have to get through the thirteenth floor, and past the Lord 
of the Castle Marluxia."

"Is he the one who made you mess up our memories?" Goofy asked.

Naminé shook her head. "He ordered me to do it, but I was the one who—"

"Don't worry about it!" Goofy said, making her look up.

"Huh?" said Naminé.

"For now, let's all just focus on the job ahead of us, a-hyuck!"

Sora nodded. "Right. We'll take care of Marluxia, Naminé, you can stay with Riku and— OW— 
Mmpf!?"

Donald thwacked Sora on the back of the head, and Goofy covered his mouth with a hand, until 
Sora's tongue suddenly slipped between the fingers of Goofy's glove making the dog-man yelp and 
let go.

"What was that for?" Sora asked, before suddenly grunting as the Riku Replica was dumped in his 
arms.

"Huh?"
"Naminé, you can take point."

"Um?? Okay!??"

Lexaeus swung his blade around and clipped Riku on the side of the head, sending him tumbling, only to roll right to his feet, ignoring the injury, and speed forward to deliver a blow into Lexaeus's side.

Lexaeus grunted and hunched over, gritting his teeth.

"You're finished!" Riku declared, and Lexaeus decided that was enough.

"DON'T MOCK ME!" he roared, swinging Skyplitter forward and into the dark-aligned boy's gut. Riku flew back and into the hall's ceiling, then bounced off and into the floor.

Lexaeus grunted again as he moved forward to collect Riku's prone body. "You were too much trouble," he grunted, stopping when he saw the way the shadows of the hall, such as they were, lengthened, and darkness swirled around Riku, forming a biosuit Lexaeus recognized from observations and from the Replica.

Then Riku looked up, and Lexaeus was instantly on his guard at the look in his eyes, and the moment his foe moved, Lexaeus met the strike with an attack from his own weapon, Skysplitter against Soul Eater, causing the walls around them to crack under the shockwave of force.

"...Xehanort," Lexaeus growled.

"That's not my name," the presence in Riku responded, the tones of Riku's own voice layered with another, deeper one. "I'm not Xehanort."

"My name," Riku's mouth said, "Is Ansem."

Lexaeus glared. "I don't think so."

Riku shrugged, and held his hand in front of him. Soul Eater appeared, but this time it was double-sided, with two bat-like wings and two of those piercing blue eyes on either side of the handle. The handle itself was also longer, making the weapon look more like a pole-arm of some description.

"Come," Riku said, and Lexaeus growled.

"Did you forget me so easily, Xehanort," Lexaeus snarled.

Riku slashed at Lexaeus but it was easily met, knocking the weapon away with a swing and grabbing the boy's body by the the throat. "Did you forget Ienzo as well!?" Lexaeus hissed, slamming the body into the ground.
Riku immediately kicked upward, and Lexaeus ignored the pain, at the way the force of the kick had sliced a line in his cheek. "Before you, before you came," Lexaeus said.

Riku dove for the polearm, and Lexaeus swiped at Riku with Skysplitter, the axe catching Riku in the side and sending him slamming into one of the rose-engraved pedestals.

"Ienzo was destined to be a king," Lexaeus said. "His original circumstances were unfortunate, true, but since then he had been taken under the wing of the Lord, was rising to be a star Apprentice in his own right, betrothed to one of the last girls in the kingdom of royal blood, a girl about his own age, with whom he might finally break his silence!"

Riku blinked. "Oh?"

Lexaeus glared, wetness in his eyes, surely from irritation, a natural response to the dust kicked up in the battle. "I haven't seen him smile genuinely, since you made me take that girl and put her in a cage," Lexaeus finally ground out.

"Better than the gilded one she would have been confined to if their courtship had been allowed to come to fruition, surely," Riku posed, smirking. "Though," Riku said, looking considering, "I must apologize, while it may have been 10 years for you, it's been eighty for me. Tell me if I misspoke."

Lexaeus snarled and slammed his axe-sword down onto Riku, sending him into a crater in the floor.

"Did it never occur to you in all these years, that it was Ienzo who suggested her to me as a candidate in the first place?" Riku said, somehow visibly relaxed as the smoke cleared, practically lounging in the crater.

"..." Lexaeus said nothing.

"One of the seven hearts was our world's, it was true," Riku said, "And on average they did tend to be of royal blood, hence the title 'Princess'. Riku chuckled. "But tell me Aeles, who else but Ienzo, and his supervised meetings with her in the library, who grew to appreciate her warmth and light, who else could recognize—"

"If anyone, it'd be you, Xehanort," Lexaeus said.

Riku's face seemed genuinely confused by this, but shrugged it off. "Time is immovable, and destiny is never left to chance. Ienzo's only destiny was the one that took place."

Riku smirked, then jumped back, as his shadow grew into a broad-shouldered monstrosity, with bull-like horns on its head, and bandages binding its mouth.

"Just as yours is to perish here!"

Lexaeus hung back at the ready, when suddenly Riku and the shadow both vanished. "What!?"

Before he knew what had happened, he felt a piercing pain trough him, and all his strength left him.

Lexaeus hung his head, as everything seemed to shake and blur around him. "Forgive me, Zexion..."
"I mean, three of us have to share a bathroom? Like, why does everything have to be the number thirteen?"

"Gawrsh, seems like a hostile work environment, a-hyuck," Goofy said.

Naminé smiled slightly despite herself. "Oh, you don't know the half of it, Goofy."

Sora shook his head. "Well, when you've fixed our memories, maybe then you can quit, and come with us instead. We'll protect you." Goofy nodded. Donald scowled, but nodded when Goofy nudged him.


"Well yeah, it's not like you'd be with them or doing any of this to begin with if they weren't forcing ya, right?" Goofy suggested.

Naminé frowned. "I'm not sure that 'just following orders' is ever a good enough defense, honestly."

"Hey, Naminé?" Sora asked.

She blinked and turned towards him.

"Could you maybe try not to...it's just, when you're sad, it makes me— And I know it might not be real, but still..."

Naminé nodded, right, she should have expected this, your fault. "You still have memories of the promise you made me, to keep me safe and happy. So, it hurts you to see me when I'm not, even if you know it's not real."

Naminé smiled widely.

Sora took a step back, "On second thought, look as sad as you need to, I'd be a bad friend to tell you how to feel."

Naminé blinked, and turned her smile onto Donald and Goofy, who both recoiled in horror. "How is that a smile!"

Naminé returned to her neutral expression, with a slight pout, making the others relax. "I don't get it," she said.

"Maybe you two just need a new promise is all," Goofy said.

"Huh?"

"No matter how far apart we are, or even if we forget each other..."
Goofy put his hand out in the middle of the four of them.

Donald looked at him, and nodded. "Even if we're scared, or in trouble..."

Sora nodded. "Yeah. Whatever happens, we're friends."

They looked at Naminé, who was smiling slightly and much less creepily.

She looked behind herself then looked back at them, confused and embarassed. "But I, I'm not the one that's supposed to be here, with you guys, it's Kairi."

"You're our friend now, and you're here now," Donald said.

"Please, Naminé?" Sora begged, and she nodded, even as tears splashed out of her eyes.

"Alright," she said. "Then, even if I lose my heart, my mind, and who I am, I'll always be your friend." She looked around for guidance. "Is that a good one?"

Donald blinked. "Bit morbid," he commented. "How likely is that to happen?"

Naminé tried not to change her facial expression, as the heavy blackness that had settled into her chest, into her very soul roiled within her, even as it had made her hair streaked with white, her eyes gold, and her ears pointed. "Probably not very likely," she said, a lie.

(No, not a lie. A promise, she decided.)

"Well, then put your hand in," Goofy told her, and she nodded, and put her hand on top of the stack.

"All for one and one for all!"

Marluxia focused on keep his steps even and controlled, he could still salvage this, he could...

The sound of a corridor of darkness opening and closing filled the room, and his mouth turned from passivity to a slight scowl. "You have some nerve to show your face around here, traitor!" he said.

"Traitor? Me? Why, I've simply no idea what you could mean by that."

Marluxia couldn't help but smile a little. For a second, he'd been worried the other man would say 'as if' somewhere in there.

"You were with Naminé in the same room when she abandoned us," Marluxia said as he turned around to face Axel. "Some move to stop a comrade when they're about to do something foolish is considered courteous, is it not?"
"I mean, the most foolish thing around here I can think of is your 'big plan'," Axel said bitingly. "I mean, unless I'm wrong, using a pair of brainwashed Keyblade-Wielders to overthrow our leadership would make you the traitor, not me."

Marluxia hummed. "So then, tell me, when did you first suspect us?"

Axel shrugged. "Well, Larxene telling me to my face was a big clue."

Marluxia nodded. "So eliminating Vexen was all just to obtain the final proof?"

"See," Axel said, "I was going to go with a quip about 'weeding the garden' but there you go again, cutting right to the point."

Axel yelped and jumped back when suddenly Marluxia's scythe was in his face, in the process slicing through a few strands of his red hair, which dissolved into darkness as they fell towards the ground upon being removed from his scalp.

"Hey now, don't pin this on me," Axel said, "You told me to eliminate the traitor, and that's all I'm doing, honest!"

That said, he lunged forward and took a swing at Marluxia with one chakram and then the other, forcing the pink-haired man to leap back, and raise the handle of his scythe to block the pair of ringed weapons when Axel threw them both. Somehow, after the two weapons sparking off each other uselessly for a moment, they flew back and returned to Axel's hand.

"Because you've always been so good at following orders," Marluxia said dryly.

Axel shrugged. "Hey, I always have, haven't I? Now, where was I? Oh, yeah!" Axel bore himself up, trying to seem more important, and cleared his throat with an "ahem" before speaking in a 'serious' tone. "Larxene paid the price for disloyalty. You're next, Marluxia. In the name of the Organization you betrayed, I will annihilate you!"

Marluxia chuckled despite himself. "That line's not you."

"Well, had to try it once you know," Axel said with a shrug, before he lunged at Marluxia again, who swept past him and swung his scythe towards Axel's back.

Axel spun around and caught the blade with his chakrams, the two men glaring at each other over the crossed weapons.

"...God if Larxene were still here she'd make a phallic symbol joke."

"...Dammit all you're right, she would."

The two looked towards the sound of the door opening as Naminé ran into the room alongside Sora, Donald and Goofy, the Riku Replica slung over Sora's back.

"At least I get one consolation out of this," Marluxia decided. "Axel, if it's a traitor you want, it's a traitor you have. Naminé has chosen Sora over the Organization, it's plain to see. I wish the Organization to exist under my charge, it may be true, but surely that's less of a traitorous act than seeing it disbanded entirely."

Axel raised an eyebrow. "Pretty sure all counts of treason are equally treasonous."

Marluxia raised a brow. "And would you rather fight me, or two Keyblade-wielders at once?"
Perhaps, if we worked together...” Marluxia smirked, convinced of how own argument.

Donald frowned. "Why does everyone forget we're here," he muttered.

"Please don't get in my way, Axel," Naminé finally spoke up. "If anyone's eliminating Marluxia," she said, with a glare, "It's going to be me."

The two men blinked at this. Goofy frowned, while Sora rubbed her back as she took a deep, shuddering breath. "I don't want to hurt you, Axel," she finally continued. Without Axel...

Axel rubbed his head awkwardly. "Well, I guess we've got that in common then," he joked.

"By the way, Axel," Marluxia began, making Axel turn towards the other man.

"Larxene would actually have pointed out that your weapon is far more yonic than mine."

"Oh, right, the transphobi— ARGH!"

Marluxia took a swing at Axel in his distraction, and while Axel dodged back it still cut a deep and dark line in him.

"AXEL!!!"

Marluxia vanished into a corridor, while Naminé ram forward.

"I'll heal him! BLIZZ— Mmpf!" Donald glared at Goofy with his mouth covered and his staff taken away.

"Cure!" Sora called, but as the bells and vines and smell of flowers filled the air, Axel vanished into the darkness.

"...Lexaeus... I never thought you would leave me."

"You useless idiot."

Zexion frowned, as he glared down at Kairi's sleeping form.

"And now you've left me with this," he muttered. "What do I even do with... Before I used to read to her, would that still..."

He smelt the movements and shifts in the current of the darkness and immediately wiped at his eyes, flicking away the excess moisture, no use advertising how dusty it was down here.

"Geez, can't believe Lexaeus bit it. I always thought the big lug would be around forever."

"So did I. "Hello, Axel." Zexion said out of politeness.
"Aw, man," Axel groaned, pulling at his coat and the cut through it. "Marly just ruined my last good binder." Axel looked up at him. "Hey, you don't mind if I..."

"Oh, by all means," Zexion said, keeping his eyes on the other man, even as he pulled down the zipper.

"...So, you gonna turn around, or?"

"No." Zexion said simply. Courtesy was one thing, trust was another.

And, besides, etiquette only dictated he turn away from a lady's uncovered breasts, it never said anything about a man's.

Zexion thought he heard Axel grumble as he pulled the constricting garment over his head, and he definitely heard it, along with some grunts of exertion, when the redhead's arms seemed to get stuck over his head. "I'm not helping you," Zexion informed the other man, to an audible groan.

"Geez. Stingy, much?"

Zexion had nothing to say to that, so instead waited patiently while Axel got himself unstuck.

He did however roll his eyes when Axel simply stood there afterwards and asked him, "So, you've been staring like a creep this whole time, do you like me or something?"

"...No." Zexion resisted the urge to cover his face, from irritation more than anything else. I was staring so I could be certain you wouldn't stab me in the back. "...And for however much it's worth, I actually much prefer you with the binder on."

"Gee, thanks, say that now that I don't have one."

Axel and Zexion stared at each other before Zexion responded. "...Just put your coat back on."

Axel actually struggled with finding the sleeves to the coat and Zexion almost couldn't believe it. Even moreso when Axel kept talking. "So, I didn't see a razor anywhere, did you? How often do you think the kid shaves?"

"...She's 14," Zexion found himself reminding the other man. First Lexaeus and now this?

"So?" Axel asked. "Girls that age back home had to shave their legs and pits and stuff, especially if they wore skirts or shorts. Or tank tops." Axel shook his head. "It's just a natural thing, don't make it weird, man."

Zexion frowned, he really didn't have a response to that, so he decided to drop it. "Well, I suppose you would know, not me," he finally said, before frowning again and correcting himself. "Not that you ever were a girl, of course, but—"

"It's cool, man, I get what you meant," Axel said, awkwardly, unable to meet Zexion's eyes. Once Axel's zipper was pulled back up, Zexion decided it was time to get back to business. "Was there a reason you—"

Axel interrupted him, and Zexion suppressed a clench of his jaw. "Oh, I just wanted to take bets on which of us would go out next."

"I had hoped it would be you," Zexion said.

"Ooh, ouch, what happened to the manners?" Axel feigned hurt, though the sharpness Zexion had
always recognized was there in his eyes now, out in the open, no longer suppressed or hidden.

"Oh, I suppose we'll just have to hope that Larxene might have taken them with her when she returned to headquarters." Zexion said, and as Axel's eyes widened, Zexion knew he'd won. "Oh? Did you assume she faded? She may," Zexion allowed, "With injuries like those, of course, but for the moment, and as far as my senses detected..."


Zexion hummed. "Well then, I suppose we won't be needing Riku anymore either."

Axel balked. "You think you can take down a kid who wasted Lexaeus!? Good luck with that!"

Zexion shook his head and tutted. "You know that's not how I do things. Tell me, do you still have the world data for Destiny Islands?"

---

Endless darkness, as far as Riku could see.

What happened to me... Where Am I?

A whisper replied, echoing in his ear and his bones and his teeth.

I see you now... clearly...

Lexaeus!? Riku asked, then shook his head, no.

Riku... I can see your heart...

Darkness this foul, it could only belong to...

That's it... Remember me... Let me drift into your heart...

Ansem! Riku challenged to the dark.

Ha... You called my name... Riku... You're thinking about me... You're afraid, afraid of the darkness I command... Good... The more you think of me... The closer my return draws... And when I awaken...

The darkness erupted in front of him and around him, and Riku glared, as Ansem appeared in front of him out of the abyss.

YOUR HEART WILL BE MINE! Ansem bellowed.

"Riku, fight! Don't let him win!"
Naminé smiled at the Riku Replica as he awoke, and grabbed onto him as he climbed to his feet, holding him and supporting him as he stood on shaky legs.

"I'm sorry," she said, then looked at Sora, Donald and Goofy, Sora with a scrunched up, jealous pout on his face. Cute.

"Take care of him for me, please?" she asked them, and turned towards the next door.

...She had honestly expected them not to let her do it alone, but she didn't expect them to be so fast or to actually pick her up and carry her.

She blinked at the Riku Replica, who was also carried beside her, looking just as confused.

"You don't seem to get what 'all for one and one for all' means, do ya, Naminé?"

"She's been spending too much time with Riku, doesn't know how to be a team player anymore."

"What?" Riku asked, indignant. "Hey, put me down!"

"...I'd rather face him alone," she whispered.

Sora paused, and looked at her, looked through her, like he saw through to her very soul. She took in a breath, as she was set back on the ground, and he grabbed her by the hands, and looked her in the eyes.

"...Do you really?" he asked simply, and it was like all the strength left her because he knew.

"...No," she admitted. "I don't want to face him at all. If... If it's just me and him... I don't—"

"That's what friends are for," Donald said. "Helping you be strong, carrying you through the tough spots you couldn't do on your own."

Naminé didn't know enough, (or anything, really,) about friendship to dispute that, so instead she just nodded seriously, and said "Okay, thank you."

"...Impossible."

She blinked, somehow their steps had carried them to the last room without her even noticing, and she steeled herself, feeling the others around her, and focused on Marluxia. Who, in turn, seemed
to be solely focused on none other than Riku.

"You... you're just a shell! One that had everything stripped away!" Marluxia shook his head, grousing, disbelieving.

Riku just snorted. "What did I ever have to begin with?" he asked. "My body and my heart are fake."

"But they're still yours," Sora insisted, leaning towards him, but Riku shoved him away.

"I told you to stop trying to worm your way into—"

Sora yelped "Ah!" as Riku's shove pushed him off balance, and he fell, grabbing tightly onto the thing nearest to him, Riku, and brought their heads even closer, face to face.

Naminé frowned, and decided to test something, making her hair look red and her eyes indigo, her ears round, with a tank top and purple skorts, and leaned towards Riku, and, with Sora, kissed Riku on the cheeks.

She considered it perfectly fair, to be honest, when he struck them both in the throat with his palm, making their throats seize up so they couldn't breathe until Donald healed them, she and Sora didn't ask, it was an invasion of his autonomy, but she still wasn't expecting it, after all the real Riku would never have—

She hadn't been thinking of him as real, she realized, tears welling up.

But he was. "Aha!" she laughed aloud, letting the illusion of Kairi fade.

"Naminé!" Riku cried.

Naminé smiled on the ground, somewhere between laughing and sobbing, "The other Riku would never have reacted like that!" she said happily. "Certainly not by trying to kill them! You're you!" Does that mean I can be me?

Her laughter stopped in her throat and she froze still when she felt before she saw the shadow standing over her. She went compliantly limp when he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up to look at her, face-to-face. "You ignored me," Marluxia said, and she froze, and then she smiled, a watery smile, with laughter bubbling in her chest (manically, desperately, it must be said) at the realization.

"Haha! I did!" she said, smiling, distantly feeling the way the others came to rescue her. "We were in the same room, and it was like I forgot about you completely!"

Marluxia threw her, and she winced when she collided with the group, knocking down Sora and Riku as she landed on top of them, while Donald and Goofy took up defensive positions in front of them.

Marluxia stared her down. "It won't last," he finally said. Naminé stilled, because... "Try to escape it, but the past always catches up to you, and your friends won't always be there to hold it back." Marluxia's lip curled into a sneer. "Won't always be enough to hold it back."

The joy she felt turned to ice, because his words rang true. (She hadn't been thinking of him as real, after someone else had treated her as less-than, she had turned around and did it to another.)

"Well uh, maybe." Naminé looked up at the voice speaking.
Goofy stepped forward. "But I reckon that it's not about forgetting the past, or where we've been or what happened to us, but always choosing to move forward, and tryin' to make the future brighter."

Riku stepped forward. "My promise to Naminé, real or fake, it gives me the strength to move forward."

Naminé frowned, and he looked right at her. "Hey, you gave me a past, a life, a history, one completely separate from the real Riku's," Riku told her. "Things he's never felt, that he'll never remember no matter what."

Sora nodded. "No matter what happens, I'll always remember my promises to Naminé. I'll never break them. No matter what I forget or remember."

Donald looked at her, then shrugged, and split his beak with a grin, and for just a second... D-Did he sound Scottish!?

Naminé wanted to believe she imagined that. "Love isn't an emotion," he told her, like he was quoting someone, (his uncle? His uncle was Scottish, she thought) "Love is a promise."

"Imbeciles..." Naminé turned, and summoned Brightcrest, forcing herself into a stance. "You would chain your hearts with false memories?" Sora summoned his Kingdom Key, lifting it and holding it front of him, as he went into a squat. "Have a heart, and still cast its freedom aside?"

Riku summoned Soul Eater, and raised it level with his head.

Marluxia shook his head, scythe pointed towards them. Glaring right at— "Naminé," he said, and she instinctively looked towards him, listening. "You have made their hearts as weak as you are without one. You will never defeat me!"

He vanished, and reappeared behind Naminé, leaning over her shoulder and whispering in her ear. "No..." she murmured, shaking her head. That couldn't be— But it was. It was.

"Naminé!"

She looked up, and raised her keyblade as Marluxia crashed against it in a spin, battering at her at all sides with a yell. When the frenzy came to an end, Sora ran forward and slapped Marluxia in the chin with his keyblade, knocking him away and pulling the scythe from Marluxia's grip. Marluxia gasped at his weapon being taken, and held up his arms defensively when Sora threw it back to him, blade spinning end over end even as it sliced him.

Marluxia and scythe vanished into a portal, then reappeared in front of then, weapon in hand, raised it and then slashed towards them, a wave of pink energy cutting through the air towards them. Riku charged forward with a yell, but Goofy was faster and pulled the silver-haired boy behind him, blocking the attack with his shield.

Marluxia teleported behind Goofy into the air, and then crashed down behind them with a yell, the blade of his scythe clanging against Riku's Soul Eater as pink waves erupted along the ground, knocking Riku and Goofy away before exploding upward. "Giga-Flare!" Donald yelled, and there was an explosion of heat and light, slamming Marluxia against the wall, which he kicked off of back towards them.

"Prepare." Marluxia said, before he appeared in front of Naminé and slashed at her, barely giving her time to roll out of the way, right towards Marluxia when he appeared again, forcing her to quickly roll again and avoid another attack.

"Your hearts will be scattered!" Marluxia said, throwing a handful of petals into the air, which all
began multiplying and glowing pink until the stopped and began spitting bursts of pink energy towards Namine. She rolled away, barely avoiding the blasts, as Sora and Riku charged towards her only to get caught by some of the lasers she'd just avoided.

Goofy sighed. It was really unfair that they had to keep dragging untrained, reckless teenagers into these sorts of things. He looked at Donald, then at where Marluxia floated in the air and seemingly directed his petals, and then back to Donald, who nodded at him. Goofy threw his shield, beaming Marluxia in the head with it, knocking him off-balance, then when the shield bounced back Goofy caught it and jumped at Marluxia with his feet out stretched, shield pointed towards Donald.

Donald took a deep breath, and nodded. "EXA-FLARE!" he cast right towards Goofy, who blocked it with his shield, the blast propelling him so that he kicked Marluxia in the head, driving him into the wall. "Yaaah-hoo-hoo-hoo-hooey!!!" Goofy yelled.

Donald swayed on his feet and breathed deeply, he hadn't done that in a while.

Marluxia recovered surprisingly quickly as Goofy fell, and swung with his scythe to catch the knight mid-fall. "Your heart shall be judged!" he yelled, swinging with his scythe, sending a shockwave through the air towards where Goofy was going to land.

"Yours first!" Namine shouted, running between Goofy and Marluxia, and when she slid to a stop she swung her keyblade up at him, light shining on the tip. His pink shockwave struck her light, which immediately exploded into chains of light, which surrounded Marluxia, binding him in place, where he struggled with his arms to his sides.

"Now!" "You're done!" Sora and Riku jumped and both carved through the bound Marluxia, who immediately disappeared into flower petals.

"Is he gone?" Donald asked.

"No." Namine shook her head. "Just an imitation of him. The real Marluxia, is in there," she said, indicating the gigantic door.

Sora nodded, and grabbed her and Riku and the five of them went through the door, to be enveloped by a shining light.

Riku groaned as he pushed himself off the floor, the white marble cracked all around him.

"Your Majesty!?" he called, looking around.

But no-one answered.

"Your Majesty! MICKEY!!!?"

Riku sighed. "You protected me," he told himself, then reached for his chest, and held up the lucky
charm, the wayfinder as warm in his hand as the light of his heart was inside.

"You're still with me," Riku told himself. "They all are."

"I can't let them down."

"If the keyblade's power won't be my own, then it, and all your hearts, can shatter, be scattered to the winds, drowning in this heart-torn world, of Nothingness!" Marluxia shouted at them, from atop a strange ship in the midst of an abyss, behind him a massive, towering, woman-like figure, in a gray dress, with four wings, a red hood covering the face from above, and a large scythe, a giant version of the one Marluxia once held himself, tendrils like thorns extending like 'hair' down to the ground.

"What are you talking about?" a voice called, and suddenly, Maleficent was there, in a burst of flames. She raised her staff, and thorns and vines and brambles extended from the door they'd stepped through to the battleship, encircling it, and ensnaring it, trapping it in place. "Of course the keyblade's power is your own," Maleficent said, vanishing and reappearing on top of the ship itself, as all the others ran along the path she'd created, "Of all the..." Maleficent, paused, and Naminé couldn't help but stare at her as she took in the large 'Angel-of-Death'-esque creature Marluxia was controlling.

"...Is that meant to be Strelitzia?" Maleficent finally asked.

"Who are you talking about, Witch!?" Marluxia sneered.

Maleficent simply smiled privately to herself. "Why, your sister, of course."

The air stood still. In a flurry of petals, the scythe in the angel's hand exploded, and in a flash of light in its place was a weapon with a blue handguard around a handle, a warm golden shaft, and a head with a crescent moon at the tip, and a star coming forward as 'teeth'.

A keyblade. A massive one, of a size fit for the towering figure to wield. Naminé winced, and crouched down clutching her head as memories started pouring into her skull, of the Windy boy whose heart was tightly tied to Sora's and always had been, of friends and a War and a key. And just as she had with the painful, confusing memories she had seen earlier, with Elrena Larxene, she instinctively reached for other memories tied to this boy, memories Naminé had grown familiar with and tried to reach for, even if the man the boy looked up to had become a vessel to something dark.

Marluxia howled, a terrible, inhuman sound pouring from his throat, tears streaming down his face, his eyes suddenly burning a bright gold as darkness poured around him, and the space all around them. The vines surrounding the ship blossomed and bloomed and curled, and Maleficent blinked and then scowled as the Castle shook around them. "I trust you fools to deal with this matter," she finally said, vanishing once more into flames.
More vines burst in, filling the space, bright and blossoming and alive rather than dead and thorny, blossoming flowers and throwing petals as far as they could be seen.

Marluxia opened his eyes and smiled at Naminé. "You." he said.

She froze.

"Naminé!"

Sora ran towards her, but thorns circled around her as she stood immobilized and still. "Your heart is now in shackles." Marluxia told her, and she stared at him, because— "My heart?" she wondered, she couldn't possibly... and even if, how could he...

Sora pushed her out of the way so he was surrounded by the thorns, as they finally closed in. "Sora!" Naminé cried out.

Sora broke out of the thorns, but Marluxia wasn't finished. "No good!" Marluxia taunted, and the angel appeared before Sora and slammed the keyblade down, making Sora scream.

Riku charged forward, and Marluxia roared "Behold!" as the angel appeared before him in turn and stabbed the ground, sending a pink shockwave radiating all around, crashing against the silver-haired replica and pushing him back.

Donald and Goofy came, rushing forward, but the wind swirled around Marluxia as he raised his hand. "Scatter to oblivion!" A cyclone shot forward into Donald and Goofy, knocking them aside.

"You're all alone now," Marluxia told Naminé as she stared, numbly, at how quickly all her friends had fallen. "What are you going to do now?"

She took a breath, and readied her keyblade.

Marluxia smirked at her. "Oh? Do you want to scream?" Petals chased after her, and she formed a barrier from chains when they fired pink bursts at her, reflecting them towards Marluxia himself. Only, when the smoke cleared, she saw that his Angel had covered him with one of the orange tendrils extending from its head.

She jumped towards him, raising her key above her head, only to be blocked by a strike by the angel. The angel attacked and Naminé guarded, immediately on the defense, owing to the giant's significantly longer reach. "Did you think you were afraid of me before, Naminé?" Marluxia asked her. "You'll now know real fear, my Bird of Paradise."

Naminé was focused on blocking the attacks, but... "You mean, like the flower?" She considered the angel in front of her, the hood on top (which was also a face-mask?) was pink, and tapered down the ribbon-like tendrils to orange, and the white, angelic wings also had the same pink fading to orange color scheme.

"Oh, so you were paying attention." Marluxia said. "I'm glad," he added, surprisingly genuine-seeming. "Once the War is over, and the $\chi$ is mine, I'll be sure to keep a plot for you in my new garden... Along with all the other weeds!"

Naminé really needed to be more careful when she was confronted with memories that really hurt.

...What did it say about her, that when confronted with pain, she sought only more?

The Angel lifted the keyblade and more vines burst into the space, punching through what seemed
to be the starry sky itself. Naminé lunged back and slashed at a vine approaching the downed Donald, and then another that crept towards Sora.

"Naminé!" she looked, and saw Riku, pushing himself to his feet, only for the angel to reappear and slam the key into his back, pinning him down.

"Riku!" she called, and went to rush over, only for her to turn and see another vine creeping towards her, inches away.

"Look out!" Goofy slammed into the vine with his shield, then spun around to block a blow from the Angel, actually bouncing the giant and its weapon away, before he grabbed Naminé by the forearm and the two spun, around, throwing shield and Keyblade at Marluxia's face. Naminé blinked. This was Goofy's plan? Well, okay, she decided, before using the momentum from the spin to throw him at Marluxia, as the shield bounced off the pinkette Goofy caught it in midair and slammed into the man's gut, while Naminé jumped and slashed towards his face.

Only for him to catch her by the wrist.

"Naminé!" Goofy cried out, only to glare as a vine appeared between them, and he had to face it down, knight and plant circling each other.

She stared at Marluxia, and he at her. She tried to control her breathing, and keep herself from shaking, but the smirk in his eyes told her that he knew what she was thinking. "What would you even do without me around?" he finally asked, before shaking his head. "We both know, however the rest of this goes, this is the beginning of the end. There's no happy ending," he said, looking up towards the Angel, which leaned down and wiped a fresh tear from his cheek.

She glared at him, as he held her by the chin. "I'll do whatever I want," she spat at him. "I'll be free."

Marluxia laughed at her at this. "Will you now?" he asked with mirth, glancing over Sora, Donald and Riku. "What about your obligations and promises, you'll be trapped by those, won't you?" She shook her head, no, she'd keep her promises because she wanted to, chose to, wouldn't she? "What about the inevitability of fate?" Marluxia pressed on. "All things end, child, us most of all, fated for the abyss. Whether Darkness claims you, or the princess's light, your end shall come all the same. And what of our Superior? Do you think his cage so much more pleasing than mine? Or..." Marluxia glanced between her, and Sora, and the way Naminé looked back at him. "Or, perhaps," he said slowly, "You have not abandoned my plan at all, and are simply cutting me out of it."

She glared at him. "I won't use him, or anyone like that. I won't."

Marluxia smiled. "Do you even know how to do anything else? When have I, or anyone for that matter, ever taught you such a thing as selflessness?"

Naminé hung her head, and then looked up at him and smiled. "Sora did, right here, today! And he's already taught me more than you ever have! I won't betray that, and I will keep my promises!" having said that, she jerked her head out of his grip, and bit his middle finger, making him grimace in pain, before jumping back, keyblade in hand. "My friends are my power!" Naminé told him.

Marluxia glared. "Then I shall take you, for your final lesson, to a place where your promises, friends, loyalties and power are all equally meaningless! To the world without light!" Darkness gathered in the hands of the angel, and then expanded, enveloping everything as far as she could see.
"Your hopes are doomed to the darkness." Marluxia's voice seemed to come from all around her. "As lightless oblivion devours you, drown in the ever-blooming darkness!"

She looked around, unsure whether she was still where she had been, when a vine shot forward out of the black and she cut through it, sending a fire spell to burn its way down it for good measure. The angel appeared, stepping forward and taking a slash with Marluxia's scythe, the massive weapon trailing pink death in the wake of the blade.

Then Naminé spun around and met a blow from Marluxia, who held the purple and gold star-themed keyblade the angel had wielded earlier (shrunken as an adjustment for his size, naturally) overhead.

They glared at each other, keyblade against keyblade, then both reached out with power and magic amidst the darkness.

"Sleepza!" "Sleepza!"

Naminé fell, through the darkness of sleep, passed stained glass pillars. She could see her own, with her image and the image of a boy, or an old man, or both or neither, the source of the golden eyes and white hair, and, somehow, she also saw one of Marluxia, or Lauriam much the same. Tying them into the abyss, piercing the glass, were black chains of darkness, dark memories, that lead somewhere into the black, likely to wherever the heart of the boy that became an old man truly resided.

_I told you your heart was in shackles, didn't I?_

She fell right past the platforms, falling deeper and deeper into endless black until suddenly it felt like she was rising, pulled up, _up up_ until she broke the surface of some body of water, gasping for breath as she stood in a bright place with clouds and water all around her.

Then, gasping for breath beside her, rising from the glassy solid water beneath her feet was Marluxia, starry keyblade in one hand and scythe in the other.

In the distance, dimly, Naminé could see what seemed like stars, thirteen of them, and though she didn't notice it when Marluxia attacked her, one of those stars gasped to herself.

The guide of this place, a spirit of dreams, who happened to look like a stuffed cat plush toy, came down beside the shocked star in a ball of light and shook their head as they watched the goings on.

"I know sleep and death touch, but this is ridiculous," they muttered to themself. "Also, the scythe? _Real_ cliche. Uh, no offense," they said to their starry companion, "I know he's—"

"Shush," the star hushed them, making them snap silent. "Sorry!" the female star squeaked out, sounding embarrassed, "I just mean that this is obviously their business, they aren't here for us."
"They shouldn't be here at all," her companion muttered slightly sourly.

"Shut up, both of you, idiots," a second star to the right of the first said. "I'm trying to watch the fight, first interesting or exciting thing that's happened here in..."

He was silenced as a wave of pink death and links of memory and light flew past them and over their heads from the fighters.

"...Can they hurt us?" the male star finally asked, sounding worried beneath the bravado and smugness he projected.

Naminé didn't have to ask if Marluxia could hurt her, blood (actual blood?!) dripping from her temple where the scythe had nicked her, dream or not, it certainly felt real enough.

...That didn't mean it was her real body or that if he harmed her here that it would actually harm her in reality, the fact that she was bleeding instead of leaking darkness or fading seemed to indicate otherwise, and that her 'self' here was in some sense imaginary.

...But Naminé refused to let him hurt her ever again, imaginary or not.

Easier said than done of course, as a wild and mad spin of scythe and key sent Sakura petals flying in a gale that sliced and pushed at her even as she tried to block the weapons themselves.

"I am death, child, and death is all that awaits you," Marluxia (Lauriam) told her. ("Oh, no," "And I thought my brother was pathetic," "Well, he'll know better the next time we see him here") "But you could still hope," he taunted her.

"I don't need your permission!" she shouted, jumping up and slamming her keyblade against his, then spinning and knocking his scythe aside.

"Then what about my forgiveness?" Marluxia asked, making her balk at him. "After all I've done to ensure your success? I told them in report after report how useful your powers were, and how keen your mind and how sharp your eye," Marluxia shrugged. "It's not my fault they cared so much more about a keyblade than they did you."

Naminé faltered. That couldn't be true could it? "...Why should I believe you?"

"Oh, you don't have to, of course. Believe what you like." Marluxia made his keyblade and scythe both shine and glow with the same deadly pink energy. "If you won't return to my side it's irrelevant." He looked at her, and she continued to face him, her face unsure, but still not backing down. "I see. In that case..."

"Soak in despair!"

When he slashed a wave of energy at at her and then another, splashing water up from the ground, she jumped and cut through them, then charged at him firing chains of light to wrap around him, swinging him around and then into and through the reflective, glassy sea they stood on, Marluxia sinking through into the depths.

Naminé blinked as, staring at her through the water, she saw the angel, looking right up at her. She screamed and breathed in the water, gurgling for a moment as the angel's hands broke the surface and grabbed her ankles, dragging her under.

"...Was that you??" the fuzzy psychopomp asked the nameless star.
"I don't know either!" the star replied.

The darkness surrounded her on all sides, holding her down, and she pushed herself up, forcing her way towards the light at birth we emerge from darkness into a world of light the memories of the heart in her own whispered, and she pushed it down, shut it out of her mind.

"Sink into the darkness!" Marluxia yelled at her, and she could feel the darkness clinging to her like his vines or his touch, and she fought harder, struggling, until she forced herself up.

She was back on the ship, Sora and Riku and the others in front of her, facing her, reaching for her, exhausted but still standing strong. Marluxia held keyblade and scythe in hand, standing behind her, holding her against himself.

Oh, she thought, I'm a hostage. A damsel in distress.

"Lose." Marluxia said, gasping, pathetic. "Just, just lose, dammit, all of you. Lose everything."

Naminé took a deep breath. "I have nothing to lose, because of you," she whispered.

"...Really?" before she could process anything, something was forced into her hands and she was shoved and spun around and suddenly she stood facing Marluxia, his keyblade and scythe in her hands, both forced into and through his body.

She took a deep breath, shocked to herself at the vicious, victorious look in his eyes.

"Your first kill," Marluxia told her, forcing her to take a sudden, shuddering breath. "The last thing you had to give, the last lesson I had left to teach you. I'm so proud of you," he whispered, slowly fading. "And of the fine Witch you have grown to be."

"No," she said, shaking her head with eyes wide and panicked, even as she leaned into his touch as he wrapped his arms around her in an embrace.

"Think of all the firsts you've had here, that we've had together," Marluxia told her, golden eyes gleaming with malice. "First person you ever met, first conversation you ever had... and now, after everything, your first hug, and..." before she could react he held her away and pressed his lips to hers in a quick peck. "First kiss."

She shook her head, it felt like she was on fire, drowning in icy water, like everything was melting around her, and Marluxia himself was beginning to dissolve from the feet up, into darkness and flowers, the petals of a cherry blossom. "You can lie to everyone else, even yourself, if you like," Marluxia told her as he summoned a flower in his hand, and brushed her hair to the side, "But I made you what you are. You'll never forget what happened here," he said, placing the flower he'd made with the last of his power behind her left ear, before the arm he placed it with vanished, after the rest of him already had, "And you will never be free," his voice echoed as it faded away, after
his body already had, and the darkness in her chest echoed his words, repeated them like sweet
nothings or lullabies.

Naminé stood there, scythe and new keyblade in hand, tears streaming down her face, and she was
ready to collapse and sob, letting the world pass her by, fade away. She wanted to cry and cry and
never stop crying.

But then she heard footsteps behind her.

She turned and ran, pushing herself past her friends and towards the exit, and she heard them call
her name, and she told herself she'd apologize to them, but later, or never, or for however long she
could put it off.

Or... she thought, before reaching out and breaking off that last newest link in the chain, of Marl—
M— of his last words, and her reaction to them. She wasn't breaking her promise, really, she wasn't
hurting anyone.

You're hurting yourself, an inner voice like Kairi's whispered.

Riku blinked and nearly stumbled as the castle shook and shuddered around him, and he sniffed at
the air in shock as a vast darkness that had burst to its fullest state only moments ago vanished
without a trace.

"The strongest scent just died," Riku muttered aloud.

"That was Marluxia, keeper of the castle. Ex-Keeper, I should say," said a man in one of those
black cloaks with dark gray hair, with a bang covering one eye. "Oh, but do forgive me, where are
my manners? I am Zexion."

"I don't care." Riku said.

"No, I suppose you don't. I imagine you care more about the Keyblade Wielder that just finished
Marluxia off."

Riku blinked. "Sora and Kairi are here!?" he asked.

Zexion smirked. "Would you like to go to them? Can you even face them now?"

"What's that mean?" Riku asked suspiciously.

"Darkness and Ansem's shadow nest within your heart," the Nobody said easily. "Aren't you
ashamed to face them in that state?"

"What—"
"Sora's fate is to battle the darkness and those who host it—in other words, you. And who could possibly risk a Princess's pure light being tainted by the darkness? If you don't believe me..." The man tossed Riku a card, and Riku scowled at him as he caught it. "...Then you had better see the truth for yourself."

Riku blinked as he saw the image on the card's face. "Wait, this is—"

"Yes. It is your home," Zexion said as he disappeared.

As Sora closed the door, Naminé breathed and stood by as Sora sealed the door.

"Are you okay, Riku?" Sora asked.

"Not Riku," Riku said. "Just a fake. I don't remember how or when I was created, only you and Naminé."

"It doesn't matter that somebody made you!" Sora said. "You're you, and nobody else! Your heart, feelings and memories all belong to you. They're special."

Riku grinned. "You're a good guy, Sora. I don't need to be real to see how real you are."

"Riku..." Sora watched the replica walk away, while Donald turned to Naminé.

"So, you can fix our memories, right?"

Naminé nodded, and turned. "Follow me, we'll walk and talk," she told them. "You see, just because you can't remember something doesn't mean it's gone. Remembering one thing leads to remembering something else, like links in a chain."

"Like sausages?" Goofy asked.

"...Sure??" Naminé replied. "Anyway, memories are what link everyone together, I can't destroy them, just rearrange them."

"So, what's going to happen," Sora finally asked. "How are you going to put us back?"

Naminé nodded as she continued down the hall. "Right. I'll undo the links I made, then gather up and reconnect all the memories in your hearts. It'll take some time, but it should work... No," she shook her head, firmly. "I'll make it work."

Donald frowned. "But, wait, if you undo the links..."

Naminé nodded with a wince. "Right. You won't remember anything that happened here. Is that a problem?" she asked, turning to them and stopping.
Sora frowned. "I'll forget you, too?" he asked.

Naminé nodded, slowly. "Yes." she said. "To restore your true memories, I have to not just get rid of the false memories I made here, but also make you forget everything that happened here in this castle, including meeting me."

Then she turned, and walked away.

"Huh!? Hey, wait up! Naminé!"

"Hmm?" she asked, surprised as he ran up to her. "Is something wrong?"

"...You aren't going to make me choose?" Sora finally asked.

Naminé stopped and blinked, confused. "It didn't really seem like much of a choice, to be honest?" She finally said. "If nothing else, Donald and Goofy have to be restored with you," she said, glancing at the two. "You both want to remember your real lives, real friends and loved ones, don't you?" They nodded, and she frowned at Sora, like she was considering a question but didn't know how to ask it.

Sora simply nodded. "Sorry, you didn't explain that part," he said.

She nodded, and entered through a door into a room with a large flower like device. "It might take some time," Naminé finally said, "But I'll take care of you."

Goofy frowned. "Gawrsh, when we wake up, we won't remember who you are anymore," he said sadly.

"How are we going to thank you?" Donald asked.

"Well, by reminding us to, of course," Sora said.

"Huh?" Naminé said.

"Promise you'll be there when we wake up, to explain all this to us, because knowing us, we'll be pretty lost." Sora said with a grin.

"Hey!" Donald snapped. "Speak for yourself!"

Naminé giggled, then finally nodded. "Alright," she said, "I promise. I'll be there, before I say goodbye."

Donald scowled. "No."

"Not goodbye, a-hyuck."

She blinked, when Sora wrapped her up in a hug from behind, and Donald and Goofy came forward, hugging her as well. "After we wake up, we'll all be friends for real. Promise me, Naminé," Sora said.

Naminé finally nodded, forcing herself not to tear up. "I promise." she said.

Sora put his hand in front of her, and Donald and Goofy did the same, before finally Naminé added her hand to the pile.

"All for one and one for all!"
"That's a lie!" Riku shouted. "I remember everyone from the islands! They're my... my..."

Riku hung his head, and a tear splashed to the ground. "My closest friends."

"And who threw away those friends?" Zexion accused. "Maybe it's your own actions you've forgotten. It was you who destroyed your home!"

In a flash, instead of the island with a bent Paopu fruit tree and coconuts, they were on a ruined spit of land in the sky, stormy winds raging all around them.

"The islands you grew up on were sundered... scattered! Many hearts were forever lost to the darkness. Because of what you did!" the man accused.

"N-no!" Riku said, backing away as another Riku appeared.

"You hated being an islander, cut off from other worlds. So you—"

"YAAAAAH!"

"What!?"

"Kairi!?!"

"Let Riku go, Ansem!" Kairi yelled and if Riku thought she looked messy back at the Door to Darkness, she looked almost *feral* now. Her clothes had dirt all over them, like she'd been in a fight with an avalanche, (Lexaeus??) and her hair looked like it had been cut unevenly in some places and *burned* in others.

"Kairi!" suddenly, Sora was on the floating island with them.

Exactly where Zexion had been.

Riku glared.

"I thought I told you to wait!" Sora said, an angry, nasty look on his face Riku couldn't even imagine Sora making.

Kairi didn't seem to like it much either. "Wipe that look off your face right now, Sora! And how could you expect me to wait when Riku's in trouble!?"

"Kairi does care about me," Riku said, grinning, making 'Sora' look at him with a hateful snarl.

Additionally, as Riku said this, Kairi spun on him with a glare. "Ansem!"

...Oh, Riku realized. So *that's* what was going on.
Riku raised Soul Eater, ready to block when Kairi leapt at him, her flowery keyblade coated in light.

The moment the weapons made contact, he bit back a scream as burning pain like fire went down his side, pretty sure she'd dislocated something. He collapsed and tried to roll away,

"Kairi, it's too dangero— URK!"

"You don't get to hold my hand until you apologize for looking at me like I smell bad."

"You've smelled better," Riku murmured, half-delirious.

"Ansem! I haven't practiced this much, but if light magic is what it takes to make you give back Riku, then I'll do it! LIGHT!"

Kairi said let there be light, and there was light.

---

I'm fading... Consumed by light.

"You won't fade."

What? Kairi? But you... But how...

Kairi smiled. "You can't fade. No power can defeat you. Not the light, and not the dark. So don't run from the light, and don't fear the darkness. Because both will make you stronger."

Darkness too?

"Especially darkness," she told him, to his surprise. "Because it's a power that's yours, and yours alone. The darkness in your heart is vast and deep..." she said, cautiously, "But if you can stare into it unflinching, you'll never know fear again."

All this time, I've been pushing it away...

"Just be brave. Know that the darkness is there and don't give in. Do that, and you'll gain strength unlike any other. You'll be able to escape the deepest darkness —"

— and I'll be able to see through the brightest light...

"Follow the darkness. It'll show you the way to your friends."

But can I face them...

"You don't want to?" And there it was, it was Kairi's smell, like a double of her, but also a touch of... Ansem. And something like the other Nobodies he'd encountered.
...And somehow, even with all that... he trusted her anyway. Somehow, he knew, in his heart, that she was right.

You know I do. And I will! The darkness — MY darkness — will show me the way!

"Impossible!" Zexion groaned.

Kairi blinked rapidly. "R-Riku?!" she asked.

"Look sharp, Kairi!" Riku ordered, like they were battening down the shutters at one of their houses for a storm (which, technically there was) during a sleepover. She looked around, and gasped when she saw Zexion beside her and jumped towards Riku.

"What's going—"

"Illusion powers," Riku said with a shrug.

"...Why are we saying that like it's just a normal thing now??"

"How..." Zexion groaned. "How could you possibly—"

"You reek of the dark," Riku said smugly. "Not even Kairi's light could block the smell."

"...Wait, so are light and darkness things we can smell now??" Kairi asked, still stuck on, like, everything?? How did she get here?? Had Sora been this weird cyclops freak this whole time??

Zexion glared at them, and Kairi glared back.

"Tch!" Zexion vanished in a portal, and Riku relaxed.

"Riku!" Kairi cried, wrapping him in her arms.

"Kairi, wai— AAAAAH!!"

"Riku!? Oh, you're hurt!! Cure!"

"OW! YOU MADE IT HURT WORSE!!!? HOOOWWW!!?"

"Sorry! I've got potions!"

"Don't suppose you could explain what's been happening to me, could ya Mr. Riku?" a voice said as a small cricket in a tophat crawled out from somewhere behind Kairi's back.

"...Who the hell is this?"

"Language!" the cricket said.
"This is Jiminy," Kairi said.

"I'm the royal chronicler for Disney Castle!"

"Oh, where Mickey's from..."

There was a silence, as the two reunited friends stared at each other, with so much to say, neither sure where to start.

"...Wait. Wait. Kairi was he in your bra?"

Kairi blinked, then turned red and glared at Jiminy. "You were!!" she gasped.

"Er, sorry, there was nowhere else to hide and I was still under that Silence spell, and—"

Zexion groaned. "What is he," Zexion finally gasped, clutching his chest.

He looked up, and nearly felt everything stop when he saw—

"RIKU?!"

His senses returned when he saw Axel walking in alongside. "Oh, the replica, of course," he murmured. "We use this Riku to defeat the real one."

Axel didn't respond to him. "Wouldn't you like to be real?"

The replica nodded.

"Well, I figure all you need is strength the real Riku doesn't have, right? Get that, and you can be your own person. Not just a copy. You'll be you." Axel needled.

"Axel!?" Zexion gasped out. "What are you saying to him!? Gah!" The replica forced Zexion against the wall.

And was immediately surrounded by chains of light that pulled on him, holding him back, away from Zexion.

"What!? Axel cried, before he froze in place under Naminé's glare.

"Riku, please," she pleaded, "Just let him go." Riku looked at her, then looked away.

"I said let him go!" she yelled, and Riku just looked at her. "Or what, you gonna break me again? Is that what you're going to do whenever I don't do whatever you want me to?"

He turned back to Zexion, and for an instant, he and Zexion started to glow.
Then the Replica screamed, dropping his grip on Zexion, as the chains constricted and went right through him, slicing him apart into ribbons.

"No! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to—" Naminé dove forward and scooped up the replica's remains into her arms, cradled to her chest, her chest to his, even as they dissolved into darkness, which seeped into her skin.

A corridor opened and Zexion left through it, and Axel chased into another corridor right after him.

---

The Riku Replica groaned and sat up, wondering where he was, and what happened to him.

He stood, and felt his center of balance had changed, for some reason, but before he could investigate he was being walked to the corner of the room, where there was a mirror. "What's going on?" he asked, his voice coming out softer and higher than normal.

He blinked, as his legs moved, without his input, but he could still feel them, like someone's hands were guiding his hands, like his legs were being moved for him. Experimentally he tried to step towards the mirror himself and found that it worked, as immediately the control dropped and his body began letting him get to the apparent destination on his own.

When he reached the mirror and saw Naminé staring back, with his silver hair instead of blonde, he took in a breath, and felt its echo in the back of his mind.

*I'm sorry*, Naminé's voice told him.

*Marluxia was right about me*, she continued.

*You deserve this body and this life more than I do*, she finished.

Riku took all this in. "You made the card change," he finally said. "And those husks. Can you change me as well?"

*You can, now* she told him *A power the other Riku doesn't have* and it was like he was suddenly opened to a new sense, a new perspective, chains of memories, images floating all around, centered on Sora and tied through him, and he felt himself being guided, and reached out with the new power, recreating his appearance, making Naminé's face and body (and when he blushed at that realization she completely failed to respond, unsettling him somewhat) into his own.

"What's this darkness in your heart," he asked, and she stiffened.

*It's my problem*—

"No," he told her. "Let's share it."

Reaching in, he touched that darkness, similar to the 'Ansem' that the other Riku had known, and it
was like there was an equalization between him and Naminé, the darkness she had been struggling with lessened as he shared it with her.

He lessened the illusion, so he could see his (their) eyes, and saw that instead of the golden eyes Naminé had for so long, now they had one a bright aquamarine like Riku's.

He smiled and turned away from the mirror, heading towards the door.

*Where are you going.*

"To fight the real Riku."

Immediately he felt her panic, and he felt a brief tugging at his consciousness, but to his surprise she didn't immediately take over his arms and legs, or, as far as he could tell, even try to do so.

*Do you have to* she whispered.

"Yes."

...*Be careful.*

Chapter End Notes

...Listen, if you don't think talking about Axel's boobs is compelling drama and storytelling I don't know what to say to you.

So, I guess this is the part where I make transman Axel/Lea explicit.

*Affecting Eternity* is my primary inspiration for Axel being trans, mostly by being a good fucking fic in its own right.

Also, for whatever it's worth, as far as sexual attraction goes, at least for this fic and AU, Zexion/Ienzo is gay.

...Anyone have any idea how old Zexion/Ienzo is, actually? Because in KH3, Ienzo and present-day Riku are about the same height, so.

Don't ask me what the fuck Donald Duck with a Scottish accent would sound like. It's a Doctor Who reference.

...Man, poor Repliku. Poor Naminé too.

I promise, things will get better from here.

Or, at least, I think they will, I dunno how anyone else will react. But of all the parts of this series, all my plans, this is the darkest and the worst it ever gets, by my own definitions and estimations of "worst" and "dark". How uncomfortable it makes me to write it.
Chapter Summary

_Beyond the path without you
is a forgotten promise to keep._

_We may have walked side by side,
but now we go on back to back._

_And though our paths may not cross,
all paths are connected somewhere._

_When I arrive at where you are,
we may not appear to be as we were..._

_But we'll make another promise to keep._

—Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories

Chapter Notes

The [358 Days fic](#) is updating again, and the rest of this AU will be there. Until Sora wakes up, anyway, which. I guess makes it analogous to KHII.

...On a different note, I like analysis of Kingdom Hearts games sometimes. [heaRt II hearT Episode IX°— Re:“Kingdom Hearts Final Mix”](#) and [hEart II heaRt Chapter IX/4.5— Fwd:Re:“Kingdom Hearts Re:Chain of Memories”](#) put into words a Hot Take on Riku's story in KH1 that I sorta always believed but never entirely put into words, which is that Riku was radicalized by a Right-Wing Youtuber. And that Right-Wing Youtuber is Ansem.

And I just.

Listen, I want everyone to know about this because it's funny as hell to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Riku and Kairi stared at each other, neither sure what to say. They looked away shyly, embarrassed and ashamed, and finally, both hardened their resolve, took a deep breath, and started.

At the same time.

"I'M SORRY!" "I'M SORRY!"

Riku was taken aback. Kairi didn't open the door, open their world to the darkness, cast aside everyone, not caring about who got hurt. *Will our families and friends even still be there? "Kairi you have done nothing wrong, ever, in your life."*
Jiminy was about to say something, but a gust of wind on the floating island blew him into a sand
dune, muffling his words.

Kairi shook her head, and started crying, and dammit, Riku had to be strong, he couldn't— "I left
you behind and abandoned you!" Kairi said, "I'm a terrible friend!"

Riku shrugged, trying to let it roll off, it had hurt, had been the last straw that pushed him to
Ansem, but... "You were just kidding around, I shouldn't have— And, besides, I was getting
obsessed, fixated, even before then. The darkness had already gotten to me, Kairi, you shouldn't be
blamed for what I did."

Kairi shook her head. "That's what I'm saying, though," she insisted. "And it just proves my point. I
abandoned you before I even talked to Sora on the docks. I knew you changed, and I tried to
pretend nothing was wrong, and when I stopped pretending all I wanted to do was run away instead
of reaching out and trying to help." Kairi shook her head, a determined fierce look on her face.
"That's not what being a friend is, Riku. I'm sorry."

Riku shook his head. "Kairi... You were scared," he told her. "And honestly, you were right to be.
If I thought you were against me, that you were telling me not to go, if I'd lashed out—"

Kairi refused to accept what she was hearing. "Riku," she told him, "I trust you, you did so much to
rescue me, you'd never hurt me—"

"Kairi." Riku told her, and she frowned, he was looking at her like she was stupid. "I tried to kill
Sora—" he started telling her, and she didn't hear the rest because she'd punched him in the face.

"Ow!" he grumbled, rubbing his cheek, he knew he deserved it, but...

"Riku, I love you but this is the problem," she told him, "Not everything is about you, dumbbutt."

There was a long moment of the two staring at each other, the words hanging in the air.

The silence wouldn't be broken until, finally, "You think my butt is dumb??" asked Riku, ruining
the moment, as he was a little put-off by the conversation.

"Um, no?? Your butt is amazing??" Kairi told him, "I said that you are a dumbbutt, dumbbutt."

"Okay, but what does that even mean?" he asked, before she glared at him.

"Don't distract me from the very serious point I'm trying to make," she told him, raising a fist
again, before sighing and lowering it, and reaching out and rubbing his cheek instead. "Sorry I hit
you," she told him. "Cu—"

He clapped his palm over her mouth. "Nope," he told her, "I think I've had enough of your idea of
cure spells."

He grinned at her as she pouted behind his hand, smiling slightly when he felt her stick her tongue
out at him. "That won't work," he told her, "But, y'know," he said, "I've got something else you
could lick."

Her eyes widened, and she paled, and he did the same a moment later, as he realized he just said
that and so he turned around and ran.

He didn't get very far because what seemed like immediately after he felt her crashing into his
back, pushing him to the sand as she put all her weight on him. "Okay, that's another thing we need
"to talk about??" she said. "Like, how did you go from the sweet, insightful Riku I first met, to the shy, awkward dork Riku at school that hides behind fake coolness—"

"My coolness isn't fake," he grumbled.

"It definitely is," she told him, "And from there, how did you get to the, like, creepy weird obsessive Riku with the gross pick-up lines??" Kairi shook her head. "Like, after the thing about sharing the Paopu with me—"

"You heard that??" Riku squeaked, and and she gave him a Look before pressing onward.

"'I mean, what, did you do anything weird with me when I was..." she trailed off when he stiffened under her and realized she maybe shouldn't have asked that if she didn't want to know the answer. She got off of his back, and let him get to a sitting position, and wasn't sure if she liked the way he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Kairi..." Riku said and Kairi took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm.

"I didn't," he finally, said, unprompted, and she let her breath back out again. "...But I thought about it, had... dreams..."

Kairi tried to calm herself and keep breathing again. "Okay, so, but." she forced her thoughts into order. "You knew it would have been wrong, even then?" she asked him. He nodded. "You knew why it was wrong?" she pressed. He nodded again.

"Okay, then, that's." she breathed again. "Good." She said simply.

"You don't want to be around me," Riku said simply.

"...I'm uncomfortable," she finally admitted. "But so are you," she pressed, looking at him again. "I can tell. There's a Riku I've always felt comfortable and safe with and trust with my life somewhere in there, and I'm gonna find him," she told him before shaking her head. "Where did you even hear about some of this stuff," she finally asked. "Because most of it wasn't from the islands, I know that much."

Riku looked up. "...He was there," Riku finally said, and Kairi froze. She knew who he meant, somehow.

"The day you arrived, every day since then..." Riku shook his head. "I didn't know if Sora was competition for you, or you were competition for Sora, but..." he shook his head. "He told me... Told me that if I listened to him, I could have the power to protect you both, keep you by my side, not have to choose... Make you both mine, and only mine."

Kairi was still uncomfortable with that, but some dumb lovestruck teenager part of her tripped over and got stuck on the part where he said 'both'.

She also blinked, when she realized something, running her hand over the purple and blue and black biosuit he was still in, and pulling on the skirt. "Huh," she noted. "You still have darkness. Still use darkness."

Riku nodded. "Yeah," he said simply.

She frowned. "I think." she waved her hand vaguely. "Maybe this is, like, magical princess bullshit," she said, making him choke and laugh. "But somehow, I think you're on the right track? You seem more comfortable, and like a better Riku than I've seen you since you were, like. Five."
She smiled sadly. "That's why I still think there's hope for us," she finally said, smiling at him. "I didn't before," she admitted, "When I wanted to leave, your darkness felt..." she closed her eyes. "But you stood up to Ansem for me," she told him, looking at him again. "Fought off your own body. And now, the darkness in you..." she shook her head. "It still feels... I dunno, dangerous," she said. "But it doesn't seem all bad to me."

"Okay," he said, like he didn't believe her, and she frowned.

"Alright then, are you still going to treat me and Sora like we're both just possessions?" she asked him.

Riku shook his head emphatically. "No."

"Are you going to be upset when we take charge, or do things without you?" she asked. Riku looked at her, then sighed. "I won't hold it against you."

She frowned. "We still love you," she told him, making him redden slightly. "Even when we're all apart."

Riku took a breath and then nodded. "Okay," he said. "I'll work on getting better at trusting in that."

"Will you marry us?" she asked, holding a paopu fruit towards him.

"Yes I... wait, WHAT!!?" he said, blushing.

She grinned, blushing as well.

"...Oh, you're just kidding," he finally said, telling himself as much as her.

"I mean, I'm pretty sure this isn't a real Paopu fruit," she said, tossing it off the side of the island, "and Sora's not here."

"...Wait, you MEANT it!??"

The King of Disney Castle shook his head. Gosh, the Realm of Darkness was tough, and he'd only been here for...

...Well, there didn't seem to be any time here, actually, but Sora and Riku didn't seem to have aged too much at the Door to Darkness than when he'd spoken to their hearts on their island.

...Oh, right, and their friend Kairi had been there too. Mickey frowned to himself. His wife Minnie ran the kingdom, mostly, so he respected women, of course he did. It's not like he'd smile if a girl got hurt, or try to stop her from getting the help she needed.
...So why, then had he only reached out to the two boys on the island, one of whom he couldn't even entirely tell had actually had the power to wield the keyblade, and not the girl that definitely did.

Mickey frowned, and considered Aqua, his friend, beautiful, bright, but dragged down by a decade in the dark. Maybe he just didn't want more of his friends to end up like that.

(It's not like the only thing he knew about Kairi, that he knew she had in common with Aqua was that they were both girls or anything.)

He frowned, looking around him on the dark pathways. This place made him think about a lot of stuff he didn't think about much. It was tough for even him to try to think happy thoughts down here.

Stuff like 'you should have been stuck here instead of her' or 'you never should have become an apprentice to begin with' or 'everything that happened was your fault' was just that slightest bit harder to ignore here in the gloom.

He needed a way out.

The instant he thought this, there was a flash of light, and Mickey covered his eyes, and saw a card, floating right in front of him. He blinked, and reached out towards it, yelping when he felt it pull him, just like a Star Shard would have.

As he left the Dark World behind, the darkness whispered to him one last time, but instead of his own voice accusing him it was Aqua's.

*You know I'm here, and you're still leaving me behind. Well, thanks, then, for making it clear how much being your friend is worth, you rat. By the time you remember me again, and finally decide I'm worth the trouble of helping, Mickey, you'll be too late.*

As they stepped into the hall, Jiminy in tow, ("If my heart is pure light, and my conscience says that kissing two boys is okay, doesn't that mean I outrank you?") Riku froze in place without Kairi noticing, so she continued on ahead.

*Riku..."

"Who's there!" Riku asked, making Kairi look back.

"Riku?" she asked, "What's wrong?"

*I know you feel it, Riku... The grip I have on your heart. You've let the darkness in... And an all-consuming darkness is what you shall become!

"I'm not like that anymore!"
Yes you are.

Riku suddenly started floating with his arms outspread, darkness rising off of his skin like steam. "Riku!" Kairi shouted, before running forward and grabbing him by the legs, trying to pull him down.

The deeper the darkness in you runs, the more powerful I become. Controlling you is effortless.

Then a flash of light filled the room, overwhelming their senses.

Grah!... Must you interfere again!?

Riku collapsed on the ground and into Kairi's arms, and she gasped in relief, kissing him on the side of the face.

"Golly!" a high-pitched voice squeaked out. "I'm glad I'm not too late. That oughta keep Ansem tied up for a little while. Riku and Kairi turned their heads to look at the keyblade-wielding mouse that walked into the room.

"Sorry I couldn't come sooner, Riku," King Mickey said.

"Your majesty!" Riku said, lunging forward, onto his knees in front of the mouse. "Is it really you?"

"You betcha!" Mickey said with a smile. Riku grabbed his cheeks. "C-cut it out!" Mickey started gasping, "that tickles!"

Kairi blinked and touched leaned forward and Mickey's tail, making the mouse's whole body stiffen like he'd touch a live wire. "Uh, could you please not do that, either?" the king said in a strained voice, making Kairi back off.

"So, you must be Kairi," Mickey finally said in a friendly tone, before frowning as he tilted his head to look at her. "Gosh, you look familiar," he finally said, "weren't you at Hollow Bastion?"

Kairi nodded. "Yeah," she said, "you used to be taller than me," she added playfully.

"Y'know, Yuffie told me the same thing?"

Kairi frowned. "Who's Yuffie?" she asked, making Mickey frown, only to be interrupted when he heard a 'thud' as Riku fell over, and Kairi and Mickey looked at him in concern.

"I'm fine," Riku told them, "I'm just glad you're here, and not just a trick," he told the Mouse. "Going from being alone, to having you both here... It's overwhelming, to be honest," he admitted.

Kairi smiled, and reached out to Riku's hand where, he realized, he was tightly clutching the star-shaped Lucky Charm she gave him at the Door. "We'll always find a way back together," she told him, "remember?"

"Right," Mickey agreed with her. "I made a promise to ya." Mickey reached into his pocket, and pulled out a blue-backed world card, with a cobblestone town and sunset. "I needed away out of the darkness, and this card showed me the way to your heart." Mickey smiled. "I guess it thought it must belong with you."

Riku smiled. "I guess so."

"Did you really think you were alone, when I was always at your side?"
Kairi and Mickey froze, and spun around glaring at the gout of green flames as Maleficent stepped out of them. "Maleficent!" they both shouted, summoning keyblades to hand.

Maleficent frowned as she took in the red and black keyblade Kairi had summoned.

Riku stood up, and pushed his friends aside, placing his hand on both their keyblades and lowering them to the ground. "Riku!" Mickey said, while Kairi pursed her lips then nodded and stepped back.

"You're right," Riku finally said. "You were there for me when I thought I was alone," he said. "I needed you, so..." He smiled slightly. "Thanks."

Maleficent closed her eyes, then nodded stiffly "Of course, dear," she finally said, and Kairi blinked as she saw a tear in the witch's eye, which fell to the ground as Maleficent vanished once more.

"Love you too," Riku finally muttered to himself, wiping a tear from his own face. Kairi decided it was better not to press, instead wrapping her arm around him in a hug, as Riku approached the door, card from Mickey in hand.

Darkness in Zero arrived in a room with a pod in it. He frowned as he gazed upon the hero of the worlds, content sleep on his face.

"Looking for Naminé?"

He turned and glanced at the Riku Replica, one eye gold and one cerulean, in a biosuit of darkness just as the true Riku could manifest.

"I can take a message for her," the replica said, and DiZ couldn't help but scoff.

"I'm sure," he said drolly. "Naminé, cut this pretense," he ordered, "And speak to me plainly."

The Riku replica scowled, but DiZ refused to be cowed by a Nobody girl wearing the face of a puppet.

"Oh, he is," Naminé's voice said from behind him, and he scowled at 'her' black coat, gold hair, round ears and blue-purple eyes. It was just an illusion.

"I just saw Roxas, by the way," the false Naminé said to the Riku replica, "he's doing well."

The Riku replica nodded. "She says thank you," he told her.

"What do you want, Nobody," DiZ hissed at the illusion in front of him.

"To be free," the Nobody said, and DiZ scoffed.
"And why should I trust a servant—" he began, only to be interrupted by a slap across the face. He scowled, and reached for the darkness, only for the darkness to turn against him, binding him in chains to the Riku Replica, a Keyblade with a blue eye in the hilt pointed at him.

"Not servants," the lesser Nobody wearing Naminé's appearance and speaking with her voice told him. "Slaves."

He glared at her, and she glared exaggeratedly back, the childish expression working well on Naminé's face. "Not that you care," she finally said. "Of course you don't, Lord Ansem, Master Ansem, in your view it's only natural for the 'lesser' to obey the 'greater'."

DiZ froze.

"You've taught your apprentices well, they've almost become every bit as cruel and heartless as you are." Naminé's face gave him a smile. "Congrats!"

DiZ hissed in rage. "Do not compare me to a heartless abomination like—"

"You are the most heartless thing here," the Nobody had the gall to say to him. "Even the Least of us has more of a right to exist than you."

There was a long silence. "Oh, uh, 'Least' is what we call the Organization's leader, Bee Tee Double-you," the Nobody explained awkwardly. "See, if they call us 'lesser' Nobodies, then he'd be the 'Least' Nobody, get it?"

"Eh," the Riku Replica said. "Needs work. How about 'Inferior of the In-Between'," he suggested.

The Nobody gasped and lunged at Riku, hugging him and making him blush and release his grip on DiZ. "I love it," the Nobody told him with wide eyes.

DiZ raised his hand, ready to avenge his dignity, but the Riku Replica appeared in front of him and caught DiZ's wrist with closed eyes. "Go see the other Riku," the Replica ordered him. DiZ scowled, but turned and left the room regardless.

Riku frowned as he took in the town.

"You must battle me, and my dark powers!" Ansem said, and Riku resisted the urge to roll his eyes. After the real thing, this was just sad. Kairi and Mickey summoned their keyblades, ready to fight, but Riku just stepped forward without Soul Eater.

"Giving up already?" 'Ansem' asked him, surprised. "Accept me as your master?"

"You're not the real Ansem," Riku said confidently, and somewhere in the distance it sounded like someone was laughing.
Riku shook his head. "The Ansem in my heart smells darker, more foul. But your smell... It's not
darkness. It's something else." Riku blinked. "You're the one that guided me here, and gave me the
cards, aren't you?" he realized.

"Correct." There was a flash and in place of Ansem there was now a man in red, his face covered in
bandages. "Call me DiZ, it's as good a name as any. I've been watching you all along."

Riku nodded. "What do you want from me."

"To choose," DiZ said simply. "You exist in the Twilight, between Light and Dark. I want you to
meet Naminé, and then choose."

Kairi gasped. "Naminé!?" she said, looking around.

Riku frowned, looking between her and DiZ. "Who is Naminé?" He wondered, making Kairi gasp
again.

"You have a choice to make as well, girl," DiZ said, and Kairi blinked. "Meet Naminé, and
discover the truth." With that said, he vanished into light.

Kairi took a deep breath. "If he calls me 'girl' again I'm going to break his face," she announced to
the air.

---

You don't have to do this

"I do."

...You promised you'd protect me

"In a fake promise, that you made for me, but more importantly, I am protecting you."

...From myself.

Riku sighed. Then approached Riku, standing in front of the mansion, the gate sealed by the
Keyblade in Riku's hand. In place of the golden-orange waves created from the keychain Naminé's
blade bore, there was a handguard like one of Soul Eater's wings, and the shaft of blade itself
seemed to have Soul Eater's tendons and membrane, fused with the seafoam.

The blue slitted eye in the hilt, that made Naminé shiver, was framed by goat horns, and Riku had
a feeling he knew what that was about, from the memories he was able to see now.

Not that it mattered. "Hey real thing!" he called, and Riku, Kairi and the King turned towards him.
"You've changed," Riku told himself. "Last time we met, you were afraid of the darkness, but not
anymore."
"How did you know that," Riku asked him.

"Because I'm you," he told him.

Riku shook his head. "No, I'M me," he said back.

"I'm me,' he says," Riku repeated.

"It must be nice, being real," Riku finally said. "A fake like me could never get away with saying that."

You are real, please

"I thought, even if I am fake, phony, that if I found some new strength, I could be someone, not you! But I still just feel empty! Even this body is borrowed!" Riku held his keyblade, ready to attack. "As long as you're around, I'll never be more than a shadow!"

Kairi frowned, and looked between the two Rikus. A blush on her face, but tinged with sadness and empathy.

Riku, if she touches my body, skin-to-skin—

"You think, if I destroy her, you'll stop being a shadow too?" Riku asked.

...Don't you dare

"You only made a promise to Sora!" he yelled, making his enemies confused, a confusion he took advantage of as he sprang forward to attack, keyblade against Soul Eater.

He jumped back as the king leaped towards him, and roundhouse kicked the mouse against the brick wall of the gate. Kairi spun towards him vertically, and Riku countered strike with one of his own, then slammed his keyblade into the ground, sending shockwaves of darkness into her guard.

Riku attacked Riku, and Riku responded by wrapping chains of darkness and light and memory around Kairi and squeezing, not enough to kill her, the way Naminé had killed him, but enough to sting, as he swung Kairi around and into Riku, through the treeline in front of the mansion.

Riku kicked to his feet, and summoned the darkness around himself into a ball of darkness in his hand, a Dark Firaga Riku met with one of his own, briefly proud that he was able to overpower the other Riku, easily overwhelming the weaker blast, only to realize that Riku was still firing more at him, a continuous stream of darkness fireballs.

Riku smelt Kairi rushing towards him, keyblade raised, and grinned. He reached for Riku's memories and hers and changed her appearance, so that suddenly a third Riku was on the field. Then, for good measure, he made her forget what she really looked like, or tried to, it wasn't like there was a mirror around anyway, it didn't need to last for long. Riku blinked in confusion, and Riku attacked Riku in that moment of weakness, Riku alongside him.

"Kairi, it's me!" Riku shouted.

"Okay, there's way too many Rikus right now," Kairi said, with Riku's face and voice, "This is too confusing to be hot."

"That's a lie and you know it," Riku told her with a grin, "Riku is a sexy guy." Kairi and Riku blushed and Riku took advantage of it, slashing at them, sending a shock slash of darkness through
the air, then jumping into the midst of them and surrounding himself with dark pyramids that burst and bit at them.

Kairi swung with her flowery keyblade, and Riku knocked it aside, bringing a Dark Firaga into her face and sending her flying back before jumping into air to slam down on top of her, forcing her to dodge, only to have to dodge himself when the other Riku tried to jump on top of him in turn. The two Riku's jumped and dodged in what seemed more like a deadly game of leapfrog than a battle before finally one of the Riku's landed and then jumped straight up instead, Soul Eater pointing towards the falling keyblade, the two weapons pointed towards each other and meeting tip-to-tip in an explosion that sent shockwaves through the air in all directions, knocking the two Rikus back.

Riku landed on his feet first and sprung forward, raising his keyblade above his head and surrounding himself in darkness "Just try to keep up!" he taunted, before rushing forward, keyblade pointed straight ahead towards Riku, and through a portal. He clipped past Riku again and again, had knocked Soul Eater and his pathetic attempts at defense aside. "You're finished!" he announced, and leapt into the air for the final blow.

He saw Riku, or rather, Kairi rush to Riku's defense, her black and red keyblade raised, and simply smirked when the keyblade of heart sunk into his chest.

"You're strong, real thing," he teased, smiling at the Riku staring up at him in shock.

"Maybe even, to the same place as mine."

"A faithful replica to the very end..."

Riku! Don't go!

I have to go. Who else can keep you safe from this. It's your body, your heart, and you deserve to have it alone.

But, without you, I'm just—

You'll be better off, I think. We both will be.

But how can I make it up to you, after what I did?

Live, Naminé.

...But. But Riku. I don't want to.

Then promise me.

...Anything.
Promise me you'll fix Sora and Kairi, and their friends, make them remember what they should, as well as you can, as fast as you can. However long it needs to take and not a second more. They don't deserve to have to keep waiting, and lose their chance at a real life.

I promise.

That's not all. Then, once you've done that... Promise me, you'll find a reason to keep living on anyway. Your own reason, not anyone else's.

...I don't know that I can.

Promise me you'll try.

...Okay. I'll try. I promise.

One last promise, sorry if I'm pushy.

Anything.

Don't let anyone hurt you, or use you, or control you the way he did, the way that I did.

You didn't—

Naminé.

...Fine. I promise. If you don't mind, can you promise me something?

A real promise? To you? Sure. I'm game.

Promise me, wherever your heart goes, wherever mine does, we'll see each other again. That this isn't the end.

...I promise. I promise that one day, the light will be ours. I'll find you, and then—

The darkness around the Riku Replica faded and melted away, leaving a girl in white, with golden hair and pale skin.

"Naminé!" Kairi gasped. "Is that you?"

The girl's eyes blinked open, and for a second she seemed to lie there, then looked at Kairi, and Riku, then at the dent in the brick Mickey had smashed into, the mouse king staggering to his feet.

Riku blushed when she got up, he could see right up her— and then, when she rose to her feet, he could see down it too— but she eventually walked, calmly, summoned her keyblade, this time only orange and wave-like, and unlocked the gate, pushing her way into the mansion, into a strange white room, at the center of which was—
"Sora!" Riku rushed forward, Kairi beside him. "What did you do to Sora!" he yelled.

"He's sleeping," Naminé said. "To recover his memory."


Naminé nodded. "Well, as you already figured out, you remember me, but Riku doesn't." Kairi and Riku nodded. "Riku's right," Naminé said without preamble. "You never met me before today. It was all part of the Organization's plan to control the Keyblade; that is, you and Sora."

"I altered your memories and his, to insert myself into them. Then, the Organization would have you under their control." Naminé seemed about to continue, then paused. "It's actually more complicated than that, but that's the gist, anyway."

Kairi frowned, and started stepping purposefully towards Naminé, only for another Naminé in a black coat to get between them and hold Kairi back, and get punched in the face for the trouble.

"We're going to need you to not touch Naminé skin-to-skin," the coated Naminé said around Kairi's fist. "It'd literally kill her, and then Sora would never wake up."

"So, that's why Sora is sleeping?" Riku asked. "To get back his old memories?"

Naminé nodded. "But in the process," she added, "he'll lose his memories here, of this Castle."

"Doesn't seem like much of a choice to me," Riku said, and Naminé nodded. "I guess you have another choice for me that isn't?"

"Yes," Naminé told him. "In your heart is darkness, and in that darkness is Ansem. Right now, he's at bay... but eventually he'll awaken, and he'll conquer you when he does. Before that happens, let me lock your heart tight. I can make it so Ansem never escapes."

Riku nodded. "Is that what my Replica did for you?" he asked.

Naminé blinked, and Riku shook his head, smiling sadly. "Didn't even notice. When Kairi stabbed you, and freed the Replica's heart, he took a big chunk of darkness— Ansem's darkness along with him." A flat-headed Dusk Nobody appeared with a mirror in its hand, and Naminé stared, tears in her eyes, as she saw her eyes, blue-purple indigo, her ears rounded.

She fell to the ground, and the Dusk hugged her in its arms, soothing her as she cried, and as she gasped. "I need— I need—" she took a deep shuddering breath, froze still, then rose to her feet, and started looking at them flatly and expressionlessly. "Sorry about that," she said in a monotone. "To answer your question, Riku," Naminé, continued, as if she hadn't just been having a complete breakdown, "No, your replica did a much better job than I ever could. The darkness is still there, and I still have my memories of it. The best I can do for you, sadly, is seal the darkness and all of your memory of it away, making you the way you were before, when you were little."

Mickey frowned at her. "Are you okay?"

Naminé blinked at him as if noticing him for the first time, then immediately curtsied politely, before smiling creepily widely. "Thanks for asking, your majesty, but no! I'm not! And I might not ever be."

The Dusk reached to hug her again, and she gently pushed the creature away. "Business before pleasure," she said softly, before addressing the others. "One of the perks of being a Nobody, and, I'll explain what that is later, is that even if you're lucky enough to have a heart, it's much easier to
compartmentalize and ignore it." Naminé shrugged. "It'll hurt worse later, but if I want to help you, I need Kairi to not be so overcome by empathy and a desire to comfort me that she tries to hug me."

Kairi frowned, her arms wrapped around herself as she stood, shaking, and finally, Riku draped his arms around her, loosely, and she leaned back against him. Finally, Riku and Kairi looked back at Sora in the pod, and Riku grinned. "He sleeps like you do, Kairi," he said. "Not a care in the world, or a thought in his mind."

"So not true," Kairi said, smiling and in the same tone. "Sora doesn't snore or hog the covers."

Riku nodded. "I did all the work on the raft by myself," and this time Kairi looked mad and pushed away from him.

"You carried most of the logs, and the rope and the cloth we needed for the sail, because I knew Sora would think two logs was enough for a whole raft," she admitted, before wagging a finger in his face. "But, Riku, I was the one who designed it, and figured out where all the pieces went and which knots to use!"

Riku shrugged. "I mean, you just admitted to enabling his laziness, so— Ha! Too slow," he told her, when he dodged away from a punch.

"Jerk," she huffed, crossing her arms.

"When you two wake up, I'll tell you both off for taking a nap," he told her. "But to do that, I can't have been sleeping myself, now can I?"

"I still remember you two, why do I need my memories fixed?" Kairi said.

"Suit yourself," Riku said.

Naminé frowned. "But, if Ansem's darkness overpowers you..."

Riku nodded. "Then the darkness will show me the way back."

Naminé relaxed, smiling slightly. "That's true," she said.

"It's just like you told me, when you showed up as Kairi earlier, isn't it?" Riku asked, to Kairi's interest, and Naminé's surprise.

"You knew!?" Naminé asked.

Riku nodded. "I knew the moment I saw the Replica again. You and Kairi smell the same."

There was a long awkward silence, Kairi simultaneously blushing and looking pale, while Mickey shuffled awkwardly. "Uh, if you don't mind," the mouse started, "I'm just gonna wait up for you kids." Then, trying not to seem like he was running, Mickey ran off.

"...So, uh," Jiminy began, hopping on Kairi's head, "I'll just, uh, write a thank you note in my journal, and see you when I wake up, is that alright?" The cricket didn't wait for an answer, instead jumping over to Sora's pod and fitting in between one of the cracks with a grunt, immediately passing out and floating next to the boy once he was inside.

Kairi looked at Naminé. "So," the redhead finally started, "if I agree to go to sleep, I'll forget I just heard Riku say that?"

Naminé shrugged. "Unless he says it again after you wake up. Then there's a chance you'll
remember both times."

Kairi frowned. "You knew saying that would creep me out, enough to want to forget it, didn't you?"

Riku shrugged. "Do you remember your mom?" he asked, and Kairi froze, then shook her head.

"...But," Kairi said, as she slowly came to a realization, "You could have asked me that instead of trying to creep me out." Kairi pointed a finger at him. "You just don't want me to be there when you fight Ansem!"

"Kairi," Riku said.

"Well, jokes on you!" Kairi turned to Naminé. "I can decide to sleep but wait to do it, can't I? I can come back?"

Naminé nodded. "I mean, the sooner you start the sooner it'll finish, but you can stay with Riku and help him until you're ready."

"Great," Kairi said, and started pushing Riku towards the door. "Take care of Sora until we get back!" Kairi called.

Naminé frowned as she watched them leave, then turned back to the mirror her friend had given her. To her artist's eye, she could see the way, slowly but surely, her indigo eyes were turning green and then yellow, and her round ears were developing points again, gradually.

More significant, though, was the way the... the weight, the pressure inside her chest had changed. Ansem... no, that was what Riku had said, had called it. Xehanort's darkness, his heart, mind, will and memory was still within her. Riku Replica had taken a massive amount of the darkness out, but the actual heart fragment was still there.

What was more significant, she realized, probing at the mass inside her, gently examining it, was what he had done with her powers. Taken the memories, of Xehanort himself, Xemnas, Terra, Naminé, the real Riku, Sora, and the memories Naminé had made for Sora and the replica, and wrapping them all up in a chain, sealed around Xehanort's actual consciousness. The voice couldn't whisper to her, couldn't control her, bid her anymore. The outward signs and symptoms would return, because it was still there, and she had a feeling that the replica, in his last act, had actually made removing the fragment entirely that much harder, bound as tightly and intricately as it now was.

But he'd still saved her. Preserved her, her 'self' and her identity and will.

She sank to the floor, and started crying again, Dusks that looked like her and ones that didn't flocking to her, and wrapping themselves around her.

*It's alright to cry, dear*
"So, you know this guy?" Kairi whispered to Mickey.

"Well, I'm not sure, but I've gotta feelin' I might have met him somewhere," Mickey responded.

"Hey, DiZ," Riku said. "Who are you?"

"I could be nobody or anybody," DiZ said slowly. "It is up to you whether you choose to believe in me or not."

"Boy," Kairi snarked, "you really like pushing decisions on other people."

Riku frowned. He was about to say that.

"You pushed away slumber, to face Ansem," DiZ said.

"Wrong answer?" Riku asked.

DiZ shook his head. "You've chosen your own path. I'm just here to watch."

Kairi frowned. "Watch," as in support him?" she asked. "Or 'watch him get hurt'?"

"Your choice as well, milady."

Kairi closed her eyes. "Yep." she said, before slugging the man across the jaw, making him drop a pair of black coats like the Organization's as he staggered back. Mickey and Riku picked them up and examined them.

DiZ rubbed his mouth. "The Organization will pursue everyone here. That cloak they wear will render their eyes and noses useless. The ears less so" he added, smirking slightly at Mickey. "They wear it to keep from being devoured by the darkness."

Kairi shrugged. "I'll be going to sleep anyway," she said. "I'll pick mine up later."

DiZ closed his eyes, paused in rubbing his jaw, then tossed one final card to Riku. "It will draw out your heart's darkness. Finish your business with Ansem."

"Let's go," Riku said, as he approached the final door.
Kairi nodded. "Right. We'll defeat Ansem together."

Riku shook his head. "I'm glad you said that," he smiled. "But no. There's no point to this if I can't do it alone."

"...Okay, this time, when I punch you," Kairi told him, "It's not even because I want to, but because we both know Sora would if he were here." That said, she slung her fist again and Riku easily sidestepped it.

"Kairi," Riku began, but she scowled at him and shook her head.

"No, Riku, I don't wanna hear it," she told him. "All this macho loner stuff?? It's gross, and I'm putting an end to it."

Mickey nodded. "Kairi's right," he told the boy. "No matter what happens, we're gonna be right there to help ya. I promise ya that."

Kairi frowned at him. "Do you not believe in us??" she asked, her lip quivering.

Riku sighed, then kissed her on that lip, making her blush and drop the act, and Riku approached the door, card in hand.

Maleficent smiled as she watched Riku enter the room.

"I smell you Ansem! Show yourself!" Riku said.

Ansem appeared at last, and Maleficent emerged from the shadows, finally. She took her time as she walked, not wanting to draw too much attention to herself just yet.

"Oh, I know what you can do," Ansem told Riku. "Your skill with darkness has matured. But I do not understand. Why accept darkness and still refuse me? You and I are similar. We both follow where the darkness leads. Indeed, we are the same, so why? Perhaps some part of your heart still fears the dark?"

Riku shook his head. "That's not it. The truth is..."

Riku grinned, as he and his friends summoned their weapons. "You just really stink."

"You're a fool to choose a fight with me," Ansem mocked. "You've been conquered by me once before. You should know what sort of power you face."

"Me and Sora beat you before," Kairi taunted. "You and all the darkness you could get! Doesn't seem that impressive to me!"

"Very well," Ansem said. "In that case, you all shall sink into the abyss!"
Maleficent slammed the tip of her staff to the ground, announcing her presence, and making the rest of the room's occupants turn to face her.

"I'm very sorry, Riku dear boy, I'm sure this is quite personal to you," Maleficent said, as surprised as anyone that she meant it. "But I'm afraid this fool's final vanquishing is mine and mine alone!"

Kairi frowned. "Uh, not to deny my friend his personal growth," she interjected, "But this guy sorta kidnapped me, destroyed my home and killed my birth family??"

Everyone looked at Mickey. "Oh, uh..." Ansem used the distraction to lunge forward with his Guardian, grabbing Mickey and throwing him into the hallway, as a barrier arose cutting off the room from the outside, but upon seeing the Guardian, Maleficent simply laughed.

"I controlled the darkness in this heart once before, do you not remember?" she told Ansem. She rubbed her fingers along the jewel of her staff. "Watch, as the Earth itself turns against you!"

Ansem floated in the air, as his Guardian convulsed and then turned on him, growling. "What!?"

"Submit!" he yelled, floating back, dodging swing after swing from the being emerging from his own shadow, and he made pyramids of darkness appear and fire orbs at them, before summoning a double-sided Soul Eater to his grip and repelling a strike from Kairi.

A burst of darkness from Ansem flew into the ground, and followed after Maleficent like a shadow, resting under her as she cackled.

"Maleficent!" Kairi yelled, and pushed her out of the way as the darkness erupted from underneath like a set of snapping jaws.

Ansem scowled, then reached out with his hand. A dark portal opened in the room, and out of it popped out—

...A strange blue Mushroom Heartless with a yellow cap? The four in the room (and the Guardian) stared at it as it tumbled to the floor, rubbing itself as if in pain as it looked around, before it seemed to light up when it saw Kairi and immediately rushed towards her. She was stumbling around after the jaws of darkness had clasped around her, and the blue Heartless held its hands to its head, where its mouth would be, as if it was gasping in shock before it reached into its cap and pulled out an Elixir which it gave to Kairi, fully healing her.

Ansem groaned and reached out his hand again, this time shadows erupted from dark pools on the floor, into lither, more slender Heartless with antennae that drooped down a long way. The Neoshadows attacked, and Kairi pulled the Truffle behind her where it hid, cowering from its brethren as Kairi slashed through one and after another, briefly raising her keyblade to guard
Riku leapt towards Ansem throwing Soul Eater, as the Guardian gathered a ball of darkness in the hole in its chest, but the Guardian stiffened and froze when Ansem stuck his hand in the heart-shaped opening. "Become darkness once more," Ansem commanded and the Guardian faded into Ansem himself, making Maleficent scoff as her control failed. Ansem appeared before her with his arms crossed, and lasers surrounded and spun around him, but Maleficent vanished backwards into a ball of light.

Riku charged towards Ansem, cutting through his barrier, making Ansem float backwards. "Insolent brat!" Ansem roared, a spherical ball of darkness flying from his backhand towards Riku, who cut through it.

"You're finished!" Riku yelled, charging towards Ansem and cutting right through him.

"Hardly... finished!" Ansem gasped out. "Your darkness... I gave it, all to you. My shadow lingers... Someday, I will!"

Ansem burst into darkness that engulfed the room, as Kairi and Riku reached for each other.

"I've got you!"

Riku and Mickey smiled at Kairi as she stepped into the pod, immediately going to sleep as it closed around her.

"So, what happens next?" Mickey asked the boy, who slumped now that his long-time friend wasn't watching him.

"Well, I can't go home. Those two idiots need looking after," he said. "Besides... Ansem's scent... It's faint, but..."

Mickey shook his head. "Your darkness belongs to you. Just like your light does." Mickey grinned ruefully. "I thought darkness should never exist, but y'know Riku, you changed my mind." Riku looked at him in surprise, as Mickey gave a shrug. "You've chosen a road I never thought of. Light and dark, back to back. With you, they mingle in a way no one's seen before. I want to see where that road leads. And if it's okay, I want to walk the road with you."

Riku smiled. "Wow, Your Majesty, I don't know what to say... Thanks."

Mickey smiled at him. "Gosh, Riku, you know you don't have to call me that now. We're pals."

Riku smiled back. "Fair enough, Mickey."
"Ahem."

Riku and Mickey turned around, and saw Maleficent, with Naminé and DiZ and several of the Nobodies in front of her, all wrapped up with thorns, binding them and gagging them. "This is all very touching," Maleficent told them, "but in case you failed to hear, this castle is under new management."

The pod Kairi had stepped into was lifted, and Riku reached for it and went to move after it, only for more thorns to surround him and carry him as well. There was a blur of movement, and in an instant, Riku, Mickey, DiZ, Naminé, what seemed to be all the remaining Nobodies and 4 pods were dumped onto the grass outside the castle.

Maleficent stepped towards where Riku lay on the ground and looked down at him. "The next time we meet," she told him, "I will not treat you so leniently."

Riku shrugged. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Maleficent turned away, and vanished back through the open door.

Riku went over to the pods, and helped a group of Dusks lift it. Glancing up, he saw it was the one with Donald inside, but that didn't bother him. It still needed to be moved.

He frowned, as turning around he saw DiZ, standing at the crossroads, and not making any effort to carry any of the surprisingly heavy egg-shaped devices.

Another Dusk came to carry Riku's part of the load, and Riku sighed and decided to see what DiZ wanted now.

"The road to light and the road to darkness lay before you," DiZ told him, and Riku walked past him.

"Neither," Riku said, cutting to the point. "I'm going the middle road."

"You mean the twilit road to nightfall?" DiZ said disapprovingly.

Riku shook his head. "No...The road to dawn."

"Um," Naminé began. "Sorry, it's just, none of these roads actually go anywhere? Not anywhere safe, at least. Where there's shelter."

DiZ frowned at her. "It was a metaphor you insolent—"

"Uh, hey now," Mickey said, "Maybe we should focus more on getting these fellas somewhere safe?"

"DiZ knows a place," Naminé said.

Mickey nodded. "Great! We'll all go there!"

Mickey might have missed the way DiZ glared at Naminé but Riku didn't.

He had a funny feeling his new allies were going to be trouble.

Chapter End Notes
The mention of what Kairi did for the raft is a reference to Restoration.

Repliku will be fine! At some point. Eventually. Probably(?) They promised, and so do I.

...Y’know, apropos of nothing, it's an interesting fact that, in the "Deep Dive" Secret Ending for KH1FM, like, Mickey was in it. Seemingly involved in the Riku v. Roxas fight. But he isn't in KHII itself, and therefore Days.

Did Disney not want Mickey involved in the kidnapping and murder of a child? Because Mickey still seems sorta involved with how he's in Twilight Town the moment Sora wakes up, and leaves a message with Hayner, Pence and Olette.

End Notes

I've set up a discord thingy if anyone wants to talk about my fics with me, even if I'd rather see comments here. tbh

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!